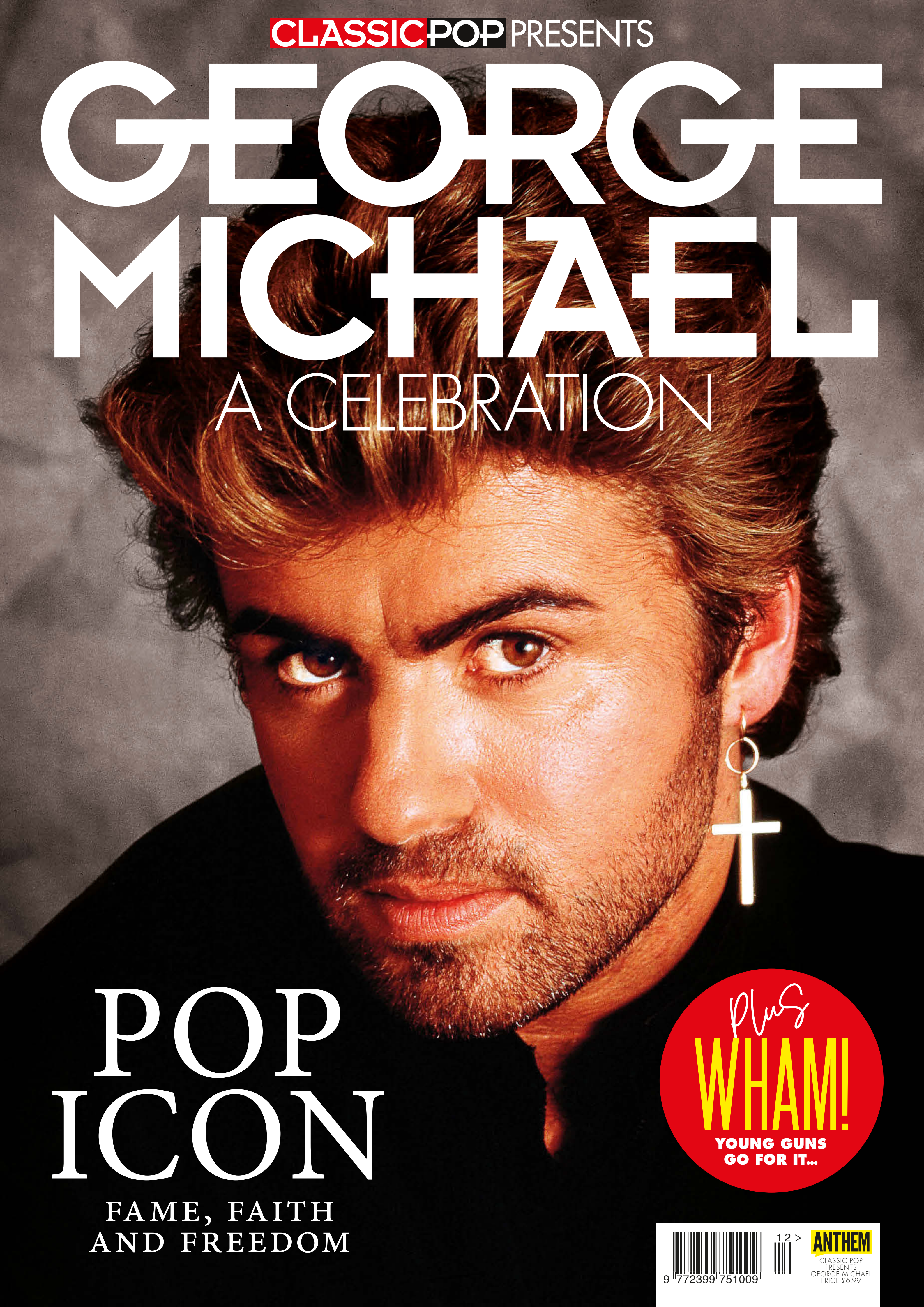
CLASSIC POP PRESENTS

GEORGE MICHAEL

A CELEBRATION



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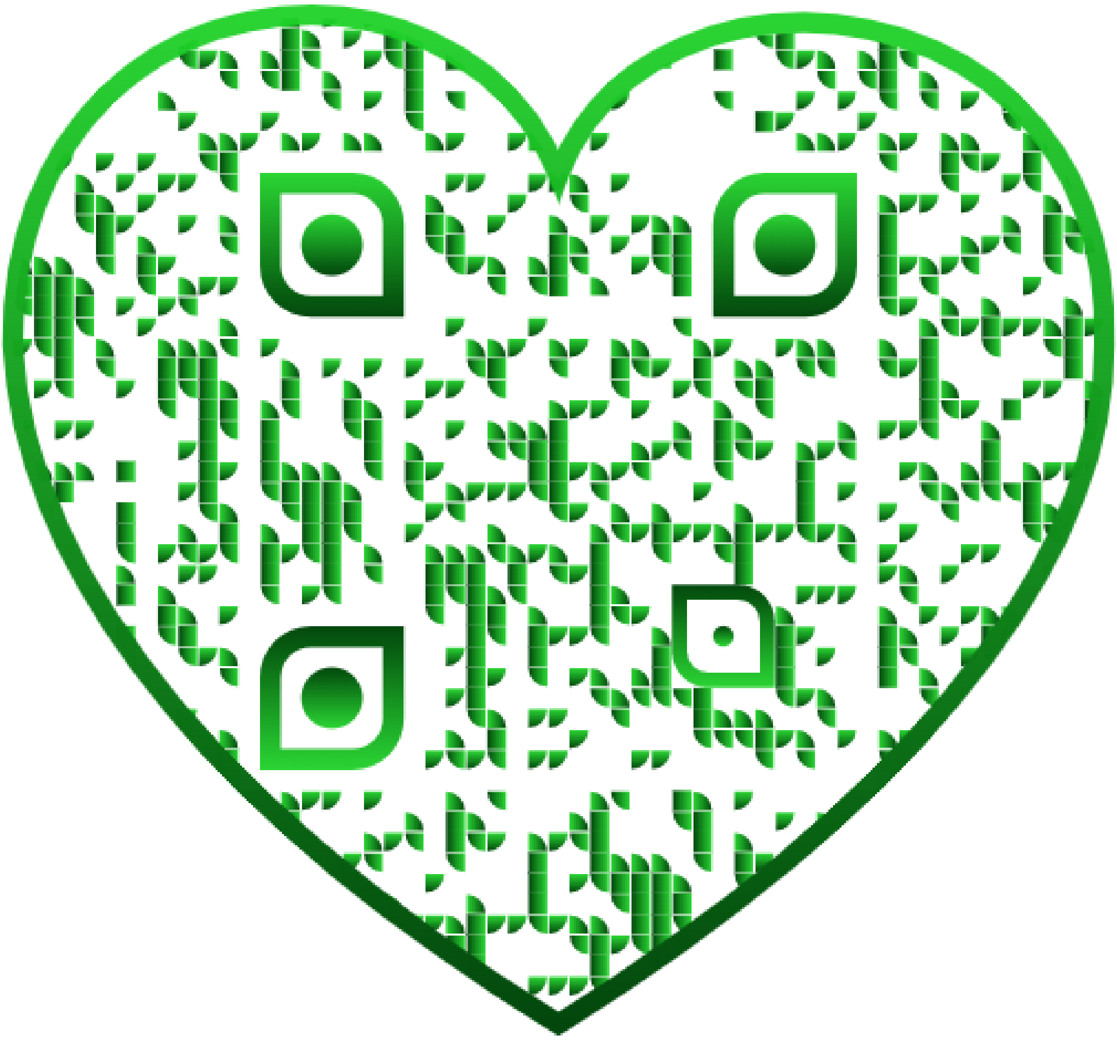

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fantasy
LADIES & GENTLEMEN
THE BEST OF GEORGE MICHAEL

GEORGE MICHAEL WELCOME

GEORGE ALWAYS HAD A GOOD HEAD ON HIS SHOULDERS. HIS VISION FOR POP SUPREMACY WAS CRYSTAL-CLEAR FROM THE OUTSET, AND WITH A SHOWBIZ-READY BEST FRIEND AND A LITTLE LUCK ALONG THE WAY, HE BROUGHT HIS EFFERVESCENT DREAMS TO THE WORLD STAGE WITH LITTLE TROUBLE AT ALL. AN EXTRAORDINARILY RARE ABILITY TO CREATE SUBSTANTIAL YET SIMULTANEOUSLY CAREFREE HOOKS MEANT HIS EARLY MATERIAL WAS THE EPITOME OF CLASSIC ESCAPIST POP. ADD A GOD-GIVEN VOICE THAT COOLLY STRADDLED THE FULL SPECTRUM OF EMOTION – FROM UNBRIDLED, JOY TO IRREPRESSIBLE HEARTBREAK – AND A LASTING CAREER WAS GUARANTEED…

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With a little nimble orchestration, George made the notoriously tricky transition from pop pin-up to serious artist look easy. Not only had he planted the solo seed early on with two timeless and mesmerising ballads in *Careless Whisper* and *A Different Corner*, but with Wham!'s triumphant curtain call, he cleverly offered fans a glimpse of the future. Then, with the help of a certain iconic leather jacket, he reinvented himself – twice.

A staunch defender of the inherent value of classic pop music, George remained steadfast in his calling. "How can you not realise the elation of a good pop record is an art form?" he demanded of *Rolling Stone* in 1988. In an era of anything goes, it was impossible not to marvel at this musical prodigy and his unshakable resolve. And in a very short space of time indeed, George vindicated himself as a vocalist of the highest order, a gifted songwriter and an iconic sex symbol. All this, and he was still a very young man.

He faced up to those artists that unfairly attacked him for his appropriation of black music by joining forces at various stages in his career with such vocal powerhouses as Aretha Franklin, Mary J Blige, Whitney Houston and Beyoncé, all of whom held him in the highest esteem.

But beyond the music George was a fascinating man, and the public's hunger to know more and more about his personal life quickly made him a tabloid target. Soon he was a prisoner of his own success.

But strangely, for a man who didn't officially come out as gay until his mid-thirties, it is his brutal honesty that saw him through. "Everything you do is you, even if it's the lies you tell," he once philosophised. Through public humiliation, bereavement and heartache, George stuck to his principles with dignity – and with a great sense of humour. Here was an ordinary man who lived an extraordinary life… but strip away the headlines and George was something else, the likes of which we may very well never see again.

Rik Flynn *Editor*

Rik

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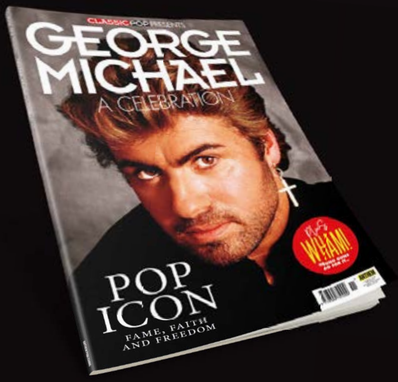
Mark Lindores grew up during the golden age of pop mags devouring *Smash Hits* and *Number One*. Writing about the artists he used to read about for *Classic Pop*, *Total Film* and *Mixmag*, he is living the dream of his 15-year old self.

Ian Wade is a freelance writer, sub-editor and PR who achieved a lifetime ambition to write for *Smash Hits* back in 1998 and has since worked for *The Quietus*, *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times*, *BBC Music*, *Time Out* and many more.

Andrew Dineley is the author of *Classic Pop*'s regular Pop Art series. He has interviewed dozens of the creative legends behind many of music's most iconic record covers. Here, he dissects George's back catalogue.

Steve Harnell is Editor of *Classic Pop* and has written about music for more than 20 years. In this issue, Steve looks at George's great albums *Listen Without Prejudice Vol.1* and *Older* as well as his Nineties life and work.



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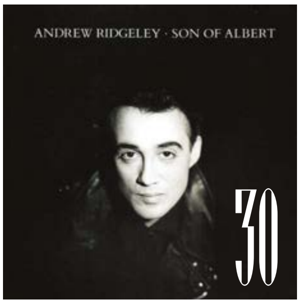

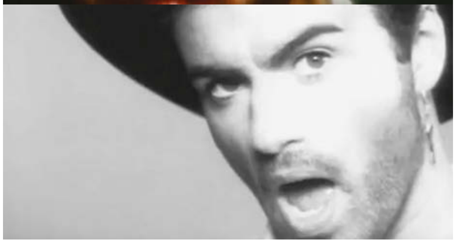

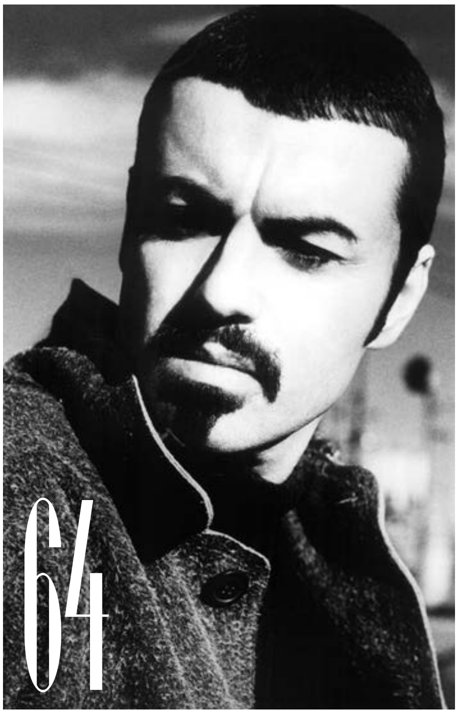

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Every Eighties kid had a pop star dream, but two lads from Hertfordshire had more: they had motivation, vision and a plan. And it succeeded beyond their wildest dreams

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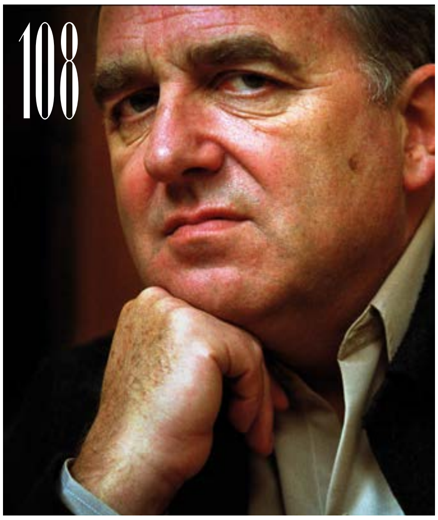

case, by producing a masterpiece – a collision of pop, funk, soul and R&B that elevated him to global superstar status

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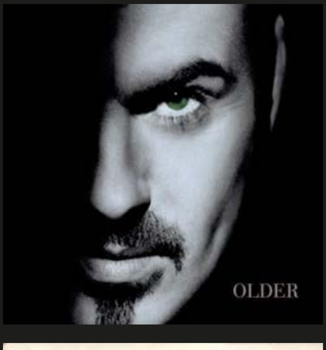
PATIENCE

GEORGE
MICHAEL
LISTEN
WITHOUT
PREJUDICE
vol. 1
+
MTV
UNPLUGGED
FANTASY
NILE
RODGERS
2CD

THE BEST OF
WHAM!

FAITH
GEORGE MICHAEL

WHAM!



From Bad Boy leather jackets and classy minimalist graphics to hard-edged satire and statesmanlike portraiture, George Michael always took a hands-on approach to his sleeve design – and a host of super-talented designers and photographers helped realise his vision

1980s

THE EDGE OF HEAVEN

AS THE DEFINITIVE EIGHTIES POP POSTER BOYS, WHAM! EXEMPLIFIED THE DECADE'S FUN FACTOR. AFTER DISBANDING AT THE PEAK OF THEIR SUCCESS, GEORGE'S SEARCH FOR CREDIBILITY AND TRUTH ELEVATED HIM TO A LEVEL OF SUCCESS HE WAS NEITHER EXPECTING, NOR ENTIRELY COMFORTABLE WITH...

MARK LINDORES

Bursting onto a music scene which had faded to grey in reflection of Britain's bleak economic landscape in 1982, Wham! – two perma-tanned pretty boys with dazzling smiles, tightly choreographed dance routines and chirpy songs about getting paid and getting laid – penetrated the charts and the magazines with a fresh, irresistible brand of soulful pop. Bringing a much-needed sense of fun and frivolity to proceedings, their breakthrough hit *Young Guns (Go For It!)* set the agenda for a record-breaking four-year stint as Britain's premier pop idols.

The antithesis of both the moody, so-serious new romantics and the pop politicos earnestly fighting racism and the annihilation of workers' rights under Margaret Thatcher's divisive leadership, Wham! were an unabashed bundle of fun, a pair of good-time guys stealing the hearts – and the pocket money – of teenage girls with their fun-filled, infectious songs, colourful videos and heartthrob looks. With just two studio albums and a handful of irresistibly catchy singles, Wham! made it big in a spectacularly short period of time before the musical maverick at the heart of the outfit went on to make it even bigger as a solo artist, establishing himself as one of the greatest talents of his generation.

THE ODD COUPLE

The Wham! story began six years earlier at Bushey Meads School with the budding friendship of Andrew Ridgeley, the school's cool Jack the lad, and new kid Georgios Kyriacos Panayiotou – at the time a shy, overweight introvert who found it difficult to make new friends. Seemingly polar opposites in every respect –

"Soft white sands, a blue lagoon..." Andrew and George living the aspirational, perma-tanned Wham! dream in Ibiza in 1983

© Photoshot

© Photoshot

© dpa picture alliance / Alamy

Happy days: this chirpy snap was used for the Japanese-market issue of *Club Tropicana* in 1983

looks, personality and outlook – their shared obsession with music was the catalyst that bound them together. They would make up dance routines, and record their own mock radio shows onto cassettes. Soon, their passion for music developed into writing their own songs, and for George this proved to be a vital new emotional outlet. His lack of confidence and inability to socialise meant he was living vicariously through Andrew, who was outgoing and sociable and enjoyed going to discos and picking up girls. George, meanwhile, spent most of his evenings at home or dutifully washing dishes in the kitchen of his father's Greek restaurant.

While artists such as Elton John, Stevie Wonder and the roster of Motown were George and Andrew's main early musical loves, the release of the movie *Saturday Night Fever* in 1977 had a profound effect on the pair, particularly George. Seduced by the sounds of disco and the confidence exuded by John Travolta's Tony Manero, he lost weight, bought some contact lenses and gained a whole load of confidence. Guided by Andrew, he threw himself into the disco scene, experiencing the euphoria of the clubs and their Bee Gees soundtrack. Before long, the *Saturday Night Fever* phenomenon stirred George and Andrew's own musical aspirations to the extent that they decided to form a band of their own.

"I had the motivation and George had the vision," Andrew later told the BBC. "I had to insist we get a band together because he wanted to do what his parents expected of him. We had talked about it for so long and he was saying 'after O-levels'… then it was 'after A-levels'… and in the end I had to say, 'No, George, it has to be *now*'. I wanted to make music and have fun."

As George had expected, the decision to pursue music as a career did not go down well with his strict father, who harboured desires of George following in his own footsteps and running the family business. "He just thought I was a dreamer," George later recalled. "I was obsessed with music, always had been, but it was inconceivable to him that I could earn a living doing it. This was a man who didn't have a musical bone in his body and just thought, 'What chance has this kid got of becoming a millionaire pop star?' The turning point came when we had a big argument because I said I wouldn't go to private school. He just lost interest after that."

While Andrew had previously been the motivational half when it came to musical ambition, George's father's dismissal of his son's dreams instilled in him a new determination. As well as spells on the dole (much to his father's fury), George took on a number of menial jobs to support himself, including working

POP_UP Alas, no copies of the pair's mock radio tapes survive. "I used to go round Yog's house," Andrew told the *NME*. "We used to incorporate the agony hour and they're hysterical. They're like Monty Python tapes"

I HAD THE MOTIVATION AND GEORGE HAD THE VISION. I HAD TO SAY, "NO, GEORGE, IT HAS TO BE *NOW*"

ANDREW RIDGELEY

on a building site, as a cinema usher, and as a DJ in a restaurant and a health club. However much he disliked the jobs, he was confident that they were a short-term arrangement and that he was simply supporting himself while he built his musical career.

TWO'S COMPANY

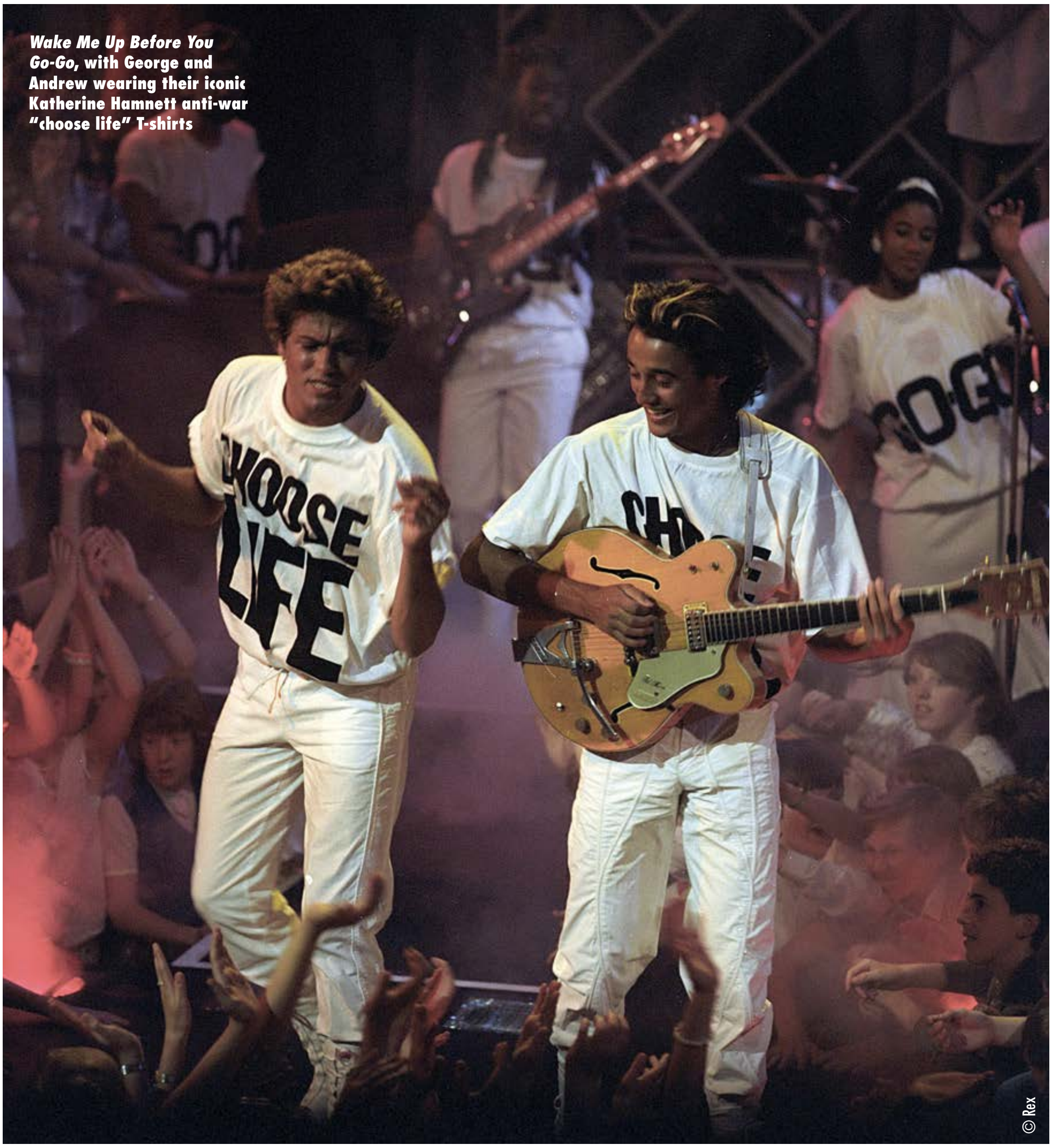
First, George and Andrew tried out various band incarnations, including a spell as a ska quintet called The Executive with Andrew's brother Paul, David Austin and another friend, Andrew Leaver (who would tragically die of cancer at the age of just 20). These Two Tone wannabes played local gigs and hawked a tape around record companies, to be met with resounding indifference.

George and Andrew settled on becoming a duo, with Andrew's girlfriend Shirlie Holliman and her friend Amanda Washburn as backing vocalists. Still without their own musical identity, Wham! recorded an eclectic four-track demo. Despite containing three tracks which would eventually become huge hits, *Careless Whisper*, *Wham Rap!* and *Club Tropicana* (future album track *Come On* was the fourth song), the tape attracted little interest. There was, however, one exception – local A&R guy Mark Dean, who had recently had great success with Soft Cell and ABC and had just launched his own label, Innervision.

Dean instantly spotted the obvious potential of Wham! and was ruthless in his pursuit of their signatures on his contract. Taking advantage of their lack of business acumen, he dazzled them with his track record of two of pop's biggest success stories of the year, and spun them a line about having to sign the contract then and there in order to meet a deadline ensuring their record could be released that year. Blindsided by the prospect of imminent success, George and Andrew succumbed, unknowingly tying themselves into a contract which essentially owned them for the next five years.

As Wham! went into the studio to begin work on their debut album, backing singer Amanda Washburn left the band, promptly replaced by session singer Dee C Lee, who happened to be in the studio working with another artist at the time. As work began on the record, it soon became apparent that George was now the musical driving force behind the band. Though Andrew had contributed to the writing of *Wham Rap!* and *Club Tropicana*, the pair reached an agreement that George would become Wham!'s sole songwriter.

Wham! in their macho leather-jacket get-up, giving it their all to an audience in Glasgow



Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go, with George and Andrew wearing their iconic Katherine Hamnett anti-war "choose life" T-shirts

George in January 1985 during the duo's suitably-named world-spanning outing, The Big Tour

"I never regretted stepping back from the songwriting," Andrew later insisted. "He didn't need the help and he didn't want it. On occasions I did feel like I could have been more supportive, but he was getting on fine without it. The creative side took a back seat for me because he was doing a great job. We were going where we wanted to go."

Despite embarking on a hectic promo schedule which saw them play up to six club PAs per night, the boys' first single *Wham Rap!*, a politically-charged novelty rap track, failed to crack the Top 100 in June 1982. Innervision attributed the failure of *Wham Rap!* to the fact that the group hadn't yet established an identity and people were thus unable to connect with them. Disappointed but still optimistic, the boys put it down to experience and began planning a swift follow-up.

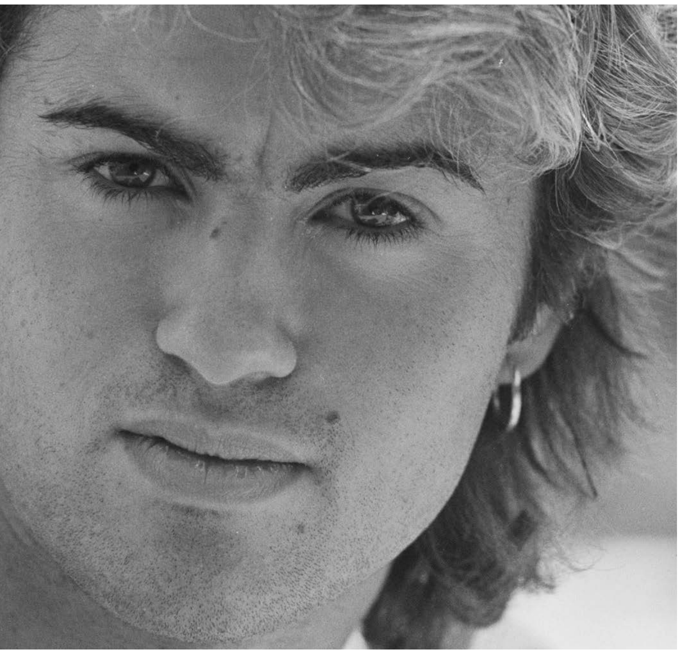
For the second single, *Young Guns (Go For It!)*, it was obviously imperative to create a recognisable Wham! branding. MTV, launched in 1981, had now established music videos as an invaluable marketing tool for artists to cultivate an image, and the good-looking duo took full advantage of it. As well as shooting a video, they flew to Corfu for promotional pictures casting the pair as party-loving playboys out for a good time.

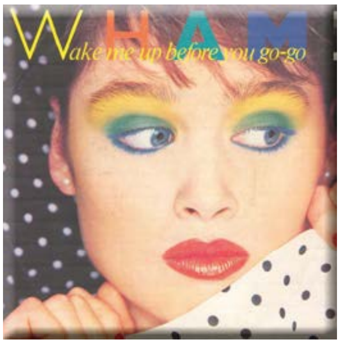
The photographs earned them coverage in the teen mags, which in turn landed them a promo spot on the BBC's Saturday morning TV show *Saturday Superstore*. Among the millions watching that appearance was a producer from *Top Of The Pops*. When an act pulled out of performing on the following Thursday's show, Wham! were drafted in as a last minute replacement, delivering the performance that would change their lives overnight.

SHOOTING FOR STARDOM

The *Top Of The Pops* performance of *Young Guns*, delivered like an excerpt from *West Side Story* soundtracked by Chic, was an instant sensation and

An outtake from the photo session for the *Make It Big* album cover





Wake Me Up... was kept off the top for a short while by Duran's _The Reflex_. Wham! never claimed it would "go in at No.1" – the quote was simply invented by reporters

sent the single rocketing up the charts, peaking at No.3. Flirting up a storm with backing singers Dee and Shirlie, George and Andrew were living their dream, having gone from performing their dance routines in front of the TV to performing them on TV.

According to George, *Young Guns*' impact came as a huge relief. "Once we'd got that initial break, I knew we'd be fine," he said. "Once we got our foot in the door, no-one would get us out."

His prophecy turned out to be true and the hits followed in quick succession with a remix of *Wham Rap!*, *Bad Boys* and *Club Tropicana* all following *Young Guns* into the Top 10, while the debut album, *Fantastic,* reached No.1 when it was released in July 1983.

Though *Fantastic*'s success seemed almost inevitable, the release almost didn't happen at all. Despite enjoying a swift succession of hit singles, the boys were disgusted to discover that they still apparently had no money at all, being forced to live on an allowance of £40 per week from Innervision. Forced into revolt by this meagre sum, they confronted Mark Dean, who flatly refused to increase it. Furious, George stole the master tapes of the album and essentially held them to ransom until he and Andrew were given more cash.

Although an agreement was reached, the episode set alarm bells ringing and marked the beginning of a series of changes within the Wham! camp. Helen 'Pepsi' DeMacque joined the band as backing singer after Dee C Lee left to forge a solo career and to become a full-time member of The Style Council, and industry heavyweights Jazz Summers and Simon Napier-Bell were enlisted as Wham!'s management.

With decades of experience under his belt, Napier-Bell's first job was the task of freeing them from the tyrannical terms of their Innervision deal. As Wham! were silenced by the legal wrangling to get them out of their contract, they hit the road for their first tour (a jaunt sponsored by sportswear label Fila, which George and Andrew wore onstage throughout the tour). The 30-date Club Fantastic tour was intended to raise money to pay for legal fees and to maintain Wham!'s profile while they weren't allowed to record new material. The tour cemented the group's status as pop's hottest property, sparking Beatlemania-style fan hysteria wherever they went. As well as the debut performances of *Careless Whisper* during the shows, the tour's main talking point came when the duo pulled shuttlecocks out of their shorts and batted them into the hysterical audience.

POP_UP Dee C Lee quit Wham! because of George's comments in interviews. "He kept saying he was going to kick the girls out and that we were only for show," she informed *No.1* magazine

A BIGGER SPLASH

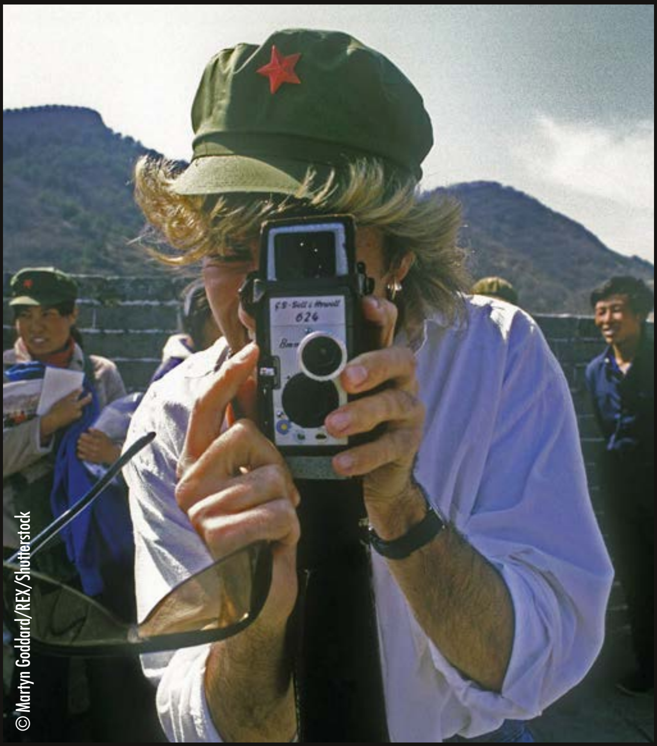
As 1983 drew to a close, so did Wham!'s first chapter. Following the tour, they flew to Provence to begin work on their second album. George continued readying songs for when they were free to record again, while Andrew continued to live up to his reputation as a professional playboy, his exploits earning him the moniker 'Randy Andy' in the tabloids.

Meanwhile, back home, lawyers for both parties eventually reached an agreement that Wham!'s contract had been unreasonably exploitative on Mark Dean's side. Dean landed an out-of-court settlement, and Wham! signed a deal with Epic Records.

With a new label, new sound and new image, 1984's rebranding of Wham! saw them achieve success beyond their wildest dreams. The lead single from the new album, *Wake Me Up Before You*

WHAM IN CHINA

A CULTURAL EVOLUTION



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When George and Andrew touched down in China in April 1985 to perform a pair of historic concerts, they were poised to deliver an enormous culture shock to a country still emerging from the trauma of the Cultural Revolution. Scheduled as part of their worldwide The Big Tour, the concerts were the result of 18 months of Wham! manager Simon Napier-Bell's attempts to persuade the Communist authorities that the country was ready for Western pop culture, and that it would be beneficial for China as it opened to the world and tried to attract foreign investment.

Though the Chinese were receptive to the idea of allowing a Western act to play the first concert in their country, Wham! faced competition from Queen and The Rolling Stones. After the Stones' two decades of hedonistic behaviour ruled them out of the running, Napier-Bell resorted to dirty tricks to ensure his act landed the concerts, feeding the Chinese authorities tales of Queen's own bad behaviour while presenting his act as clean-cut boys next door. The tactic worked, and Wham! were booked to play two gigs in China – one in Beijing and one in Canton. Concert-goers were to be given cassettes featuring Wham!'s music on one side and Chinese modified versions on the other.

As the first concert got underway in Beijing on 7 April 1985, Wham! and the 15,000-strong audience were equally bemused as how to behave. The audience, having never experienced a concert as loud and theatrical as this, sat rigidly in their seats and clapped politely between songs. George, unaware that they had been ordered to behave that way, attempted to whip the crowd into a frenzy, despite the fact that armed police patrolled the aisles.

Aside from the actual shows, the trip was a massive coup for Wham!, the prestige guaranteeing them money-can't-buy publicity around the world, with fabulous photo-opportunities including the Great Wall of China, playing soccer, meeting Communist Party officials, and being guests of honour at a reception at the British Embassy. "In the end everybody got what they wanted from it – Wham! became the biggest, most famous band in the world, and the Chinese got a concert that proved they meant what they said about opening up," Napier-Bell said.

A camera crew followed the band throughout the trip, and the resulting film was shown on big screens at Wembley Stadium before the boys took to the stage for their Final concert. It was later released as a VHS, *Foreign Skies: Wham! In China.*

Boys abroad: Andrew and George at the Great Wall of China. Despite the visit's heavily-controlled atmosphere, Chinese people genuinely recognise the concerts as a pop awakening for the country

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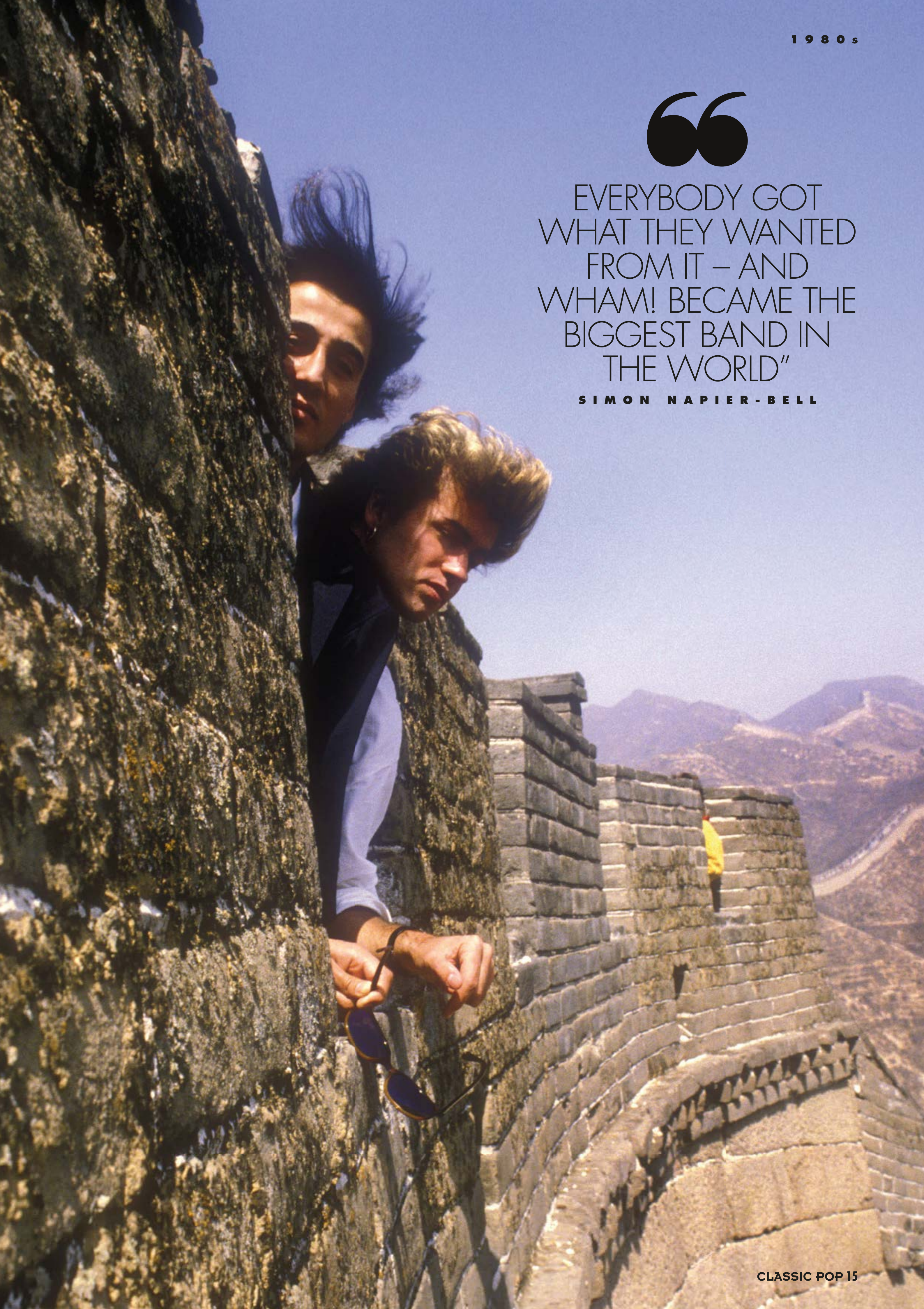


"EVERYBODY GOT WHAT THEY WANTED FROM IT – AND WHAM! BECAME THE BIGGEST BAND IN THE WORLD"

SIMON NAPIER-BELL

Last Christmas was recorded in August 1984, with George playing every single instrument. Ironically, it was also to be his last-ever beard-free release

© Alamy

"I COULDN'T BELIEVE PEOPLE COULDN'T SEE PAST THE IMAGE AND APPRECIATE THE MUSIC THIS 20-YEAR OLD WAS MAKING"

GEORGE MICHAEL

© Michael Putland/Getty Images

Helen "Pepsi" DeMacque and Shirlie Holliman on stage in Japan, 1985. Their '87 single *Heartache* was a UK No.2

Go-Go, was an unabashed slice of pure pop that was more Cliff Richard than cutting edge. The video saw a softening of their image, with a dewy-eyed George cooing into the camera, all blond highlights, gold hoop earrings and Day-Glo sportswear, before donning a white Katherine Hamnett 'Choose Life' slogan T-shirt for a cheesy dance routine. The song cast Wham! as pop's 'good guys' in direct riposte to the filth and the fury of the villainous Frankie Goes To Hollywood, and it became their first No.1 hit.

Post-makeover, Wham! seemed unstoppable. George's debut solo single *Careless Whisper* and Wham!'s *Freedom* completed a hat-trick of No.1 singles, ensuring massive sales for the second album, the appropriately-titled *Make It Big* in November 1984. The same month, George contributed vocals to Band Aid's *Do They Know It's Christmas?*, ending the year at No.1 and No.2 respectively in the singles chart as the double A-side *Last Christmas/Everything She Wants* held firmly on the Christmas runner-up spot behind Band Aid. Wham! donated all the royalties from the single to the Ethiopia Appeal. With sales of 1.8 million copies, *Last Christmas* is still the biggest-selling single in chart history not to reach No.1.

George later revealed that he felt Wham! were treated as "a bit of a joke" by their peers, and he felt uncomfortable during the recording of the Band Aid single, with whispers and in-jokes being made at his expense. "I couldn't believe people couldn't see past the image and appreciate the music that this 20-year old kid was making," he told VH1 in 2004. "What I was doing was remarkable… I was writing, producing and arranging these records, and I knew how to make them jump out of the radio. The idea that the fact that I was wearing stupid shorts and big earrings stopped people from noticing that is stunning to me."

While George was made to feel inferior by some of his peers at the *Band Aid* session, by 1985 he was beginning to feel validated by an Ivor Novello songwriting award and invitations from his musical

THE KEY RECORDINGS

GEORGE AND ANDREW'S PICTURES WERE BLU-TACKED TO A MILLION WALLS, BUT THERE WERE SIGNS OF FAR LOFTIER AMBITIONS

FANTASTIC

1983

Wham! released their debut album in the summer of 1983. Having notched up four Top 10 singles and amassed legions of fans thanks to their relentless promo schedule, the poster boys of Eighties pop were primed for success. Their blend of frothy funk, pop and rap had been gleaned from London clubs such as Le Beat Route, and their "baby biker" image combined fun – as on *Young Guns (Go For It)* and *Wham Rap! (Enjoy What You Do)* – with teenage rebellion, which came into play on the parent-baiting *Bad Boys*. *Club Tropicana* rode the wave of Club 18-30 and showed their more carefree, playful side, while George's promise as a balladeer was displayed on *Nothing Looks The Same In The Light*.

CARELESS WHISPER

1984

George's first solo single *Careless Whisper* was penned in 1981 by George and Andrew and was included on their demo tape. Semi-autobiographical, and remarkably mature, *Careless Whisper* is sung from the viewpoint of a remorseful cheating lover, and features an instantly recognisable sax riff which George dreamed up on the bus on his way to work. Unhappy with the first version produced by Jerry Wexler at the legendary Muscle Shoals Studios, George re-recorded and self-produced the track on his return to the UK. Often seen as George's signature hit, it sold over six million copies and reached No.1 in 26 countries, where it was credited to 'Wham! featuring George Michael'.

MAKE IT BIG

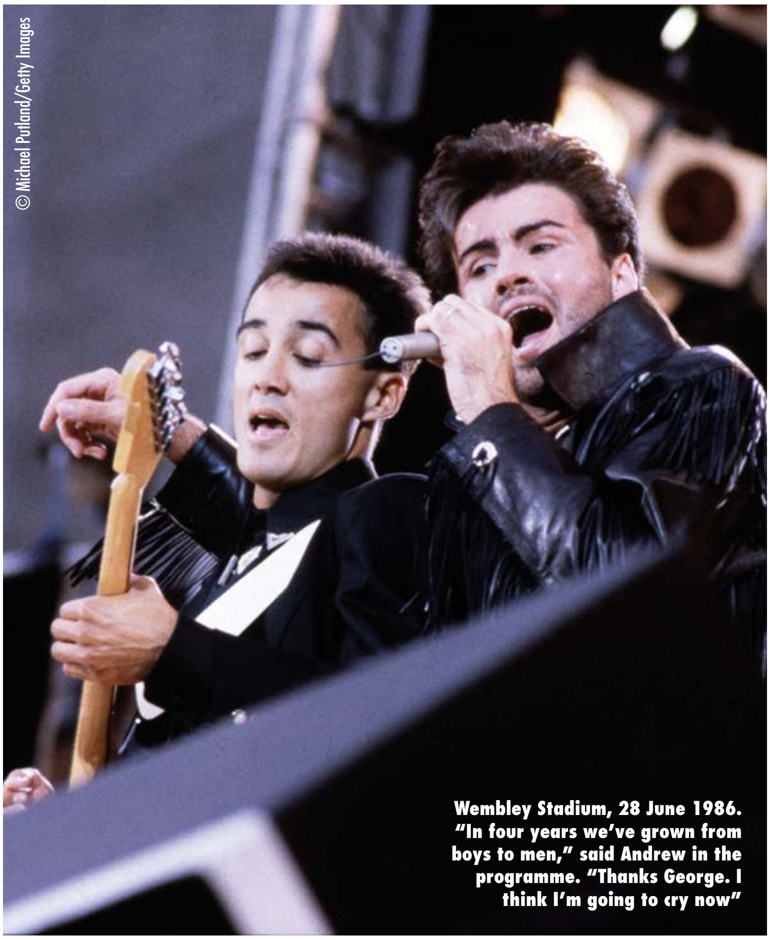
1984

Perfectly-titled and unashamedly poppy, *Make It Big* delivered one of the greatest singles runs of the Eighties, with *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go, Careless Whisper, Freedom* and *Everything She Wants* proving near-unstoppable. *Heartbeat* and *Credit Card Baby* were joyous and Motown-inspired; *Like A Baby* hinted at George's future mature side, and the album is rounded off with a cover of The Isley Brothers' *If You Were There*. Though proud of the music on the album (though he later expressed his embarrassment over *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go)*, George later admitted to having considerable reservations about his image at the time, describing *Make It Big*'s presentation as "consistently naff".

FAITH

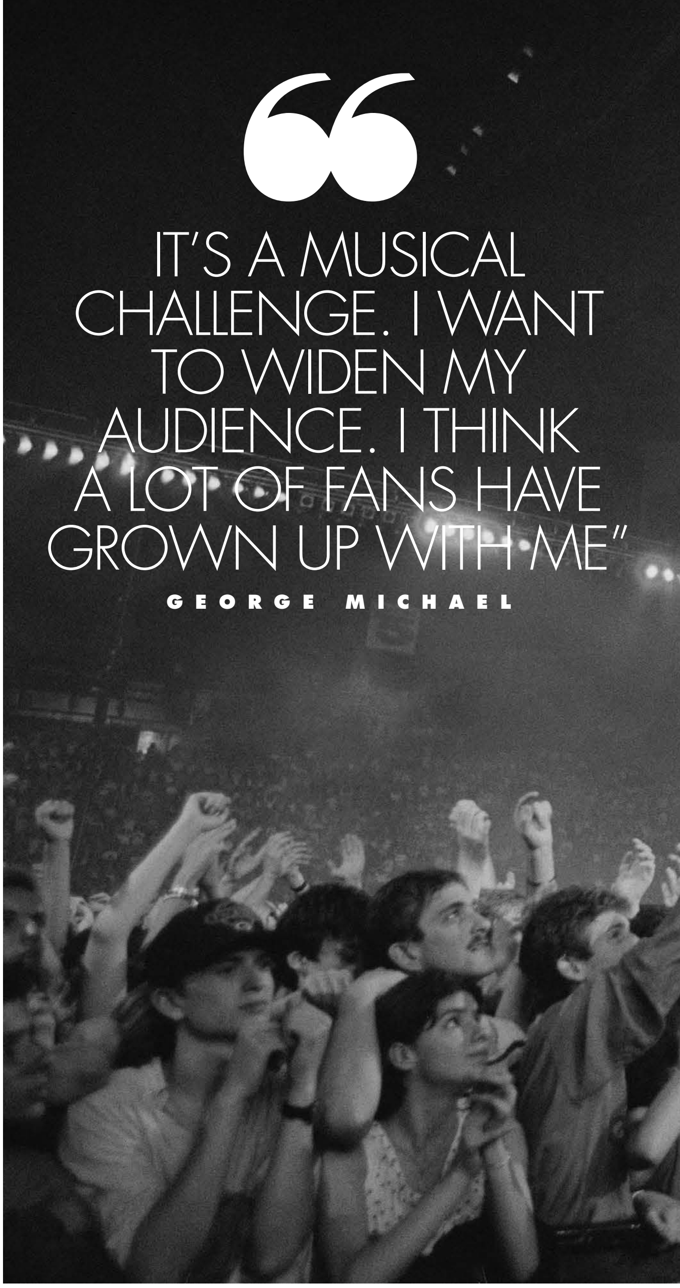
1987

The 25 million-selling *Faith* is crammed with songs clearly stylistically geared towards America, encompassing genres ranging from rock'n'roll, R&B, soul, funk and gospel to jazz. The title track was based around the classic American rock'n'roll sound; *Look At Your Hands* was a soulful throwdown, while the funk-driven *Hard Day, Monkey* and *I Want Your Sex* trilogy showed how serious George was about competing with Prince. The heart of the album, however, are the three ballads which explore feelings of loneliness and isolation. The yearning *One More Try*, the gospel-infused *Father Figure* and the jazzy torch song *Kissing A Fool* all exemplify George at his creative and commercial peak.



© Michael Putland/Getty Images

Wembley Stadium, 28 June 1986. "In four years we've grown from boys to men," said Andrew in the programme. "Thanks George. I think I'm going to cry now"



IT'S A MUSICAL CHALLENGE. I WANT TO WIDEN MY AUDIENCE. I THINK A LOT OF FANS HAVE GROWN UP WITH ME"

GEORGE MICHAEL

heroes to work with them. He held his own against Smokey Robinson and Stevie Wonder at a Motown tribute concert at the legendary Harlem Apollo theatre, and was invited to perform *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* with Elton John at Live Aid. The pair became friends, and George recorded backing vocals for Elton's *Nikita* and *Wrap Her Up*.

Below: *I'm Your Man*, which George would revisit in 1996 for *Fastlove*'s B-side, and *Jive Talkin'* with second cousin Andros, Nick Heyward, Mick Talbot and others

STEPPING OUT

In the midst of The Big Tour – a mammoth jaunt which saw Wham! perform in the UK, Australia, China and importantly the US, where they had sold six million copies of *Make It Big*, had three No.1 singles and were playing to 60,000 fans in stadiums – George began to grow disillusioned. After singing with his idols, he was feeling trapped… not only by the music he was making but also by the image of Wham!, finding himself living out the group's media personality by indulging in countless empty sexual encounters to mask the confusion he was experiencing over his sexuality.

Unfulfilled personally and creatively, following the release of *I'm Your Man* in September 1985 George shelved plans to write and record a third Wham! album and refused to participate in a deal to endorse Pepsi, which would have earned Wham! £3.3 million. He'd been shouldering the bulk of the work alone while Andrew reaped the rewards, constantly partying and enjoying his hedonistic lifestyle. Craving credibility and the freedom to be more personally honest in his work, George made the decision: he had to strike out on his own. His second

George performing on stage during the Japanese and Australasian leg of his Faith World Tour © Photo by Michael Putland/Getty Images

© Michael Putland/Getty Images

© Rob Verhorst/Redferns

Above: George in Rotterdam
Left: captured during the opening leg of the Faith world tour, February-March 1988

solo single, *A Different Corner,* gave him his second solo No.1 hit before he re-joined Andrew for Wham!'s big send-off.

Throughout the early months of 1986, Wham!'s final recordings were compiled on *The Edge Of Heaven* EP and *The Final* – a collection of all their singles to date, including George's two solo hits, released to coincide with The Final concert at London's Wembley Stadium. Taking place on 28 June 1986, "Whambley" was an emotional celebration of three remarkable years which included all the hits, special guests and surprises throughout the day… the perfect finale.

While Andrew struggled post-Wham!, spending time indulging in his passions for surfing and Formula 1 racing (he later released an unsuccessful solo album, *Son Of Albert*), George threw himself into work. In January 1987 he scored yet another No.1 hit, this time with *I Knew You Were Waiting (For Me)*, a duet with another of his idols, Aretha Franklin. These invitations to perform alongside his idols were proof he had earned their respect, and his debut album was a vehicle to match them sales-wise, too.

Having already began work on his debut solo record once Wham! was laid to rest, George felt a sense of liberation and freedom to express himself in a way he hadn't felt able to before. Holed up in studios in London and Denmark, he began to exert full creative control of the record, writing and producing the album himself. Aside from his own album, he remixed and contributed uncredited vocals to a cover of *Jive Talkin'* for his cousin's band Boogie Box High, a tribute to the Gibb brothers, whose *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack had affected him so deeply a decade earlier.

In just over 12 months, George moved from under Wham!'s umbrella to making a smash with hero Aretha, to his hot-under-the-covers second solo single, *I Want Your Sex*

Keen to distance himself from the teenybopper image of Wham! – "It's a musical challenge. I want to widen my audience. I think a lot of Wham! fans have grown up with me," he suggested to Dutch TV programme *Countdown* – George launched his career with a controversial single and video which were banned by the BBC. The funk-driven *I Want Your Sex* was a calculated effort to reinvent himself, and it brought him a whole new audience. Though the sexually-charged song got people talking, it could be argued that the shock tactics were unnecessary; indeed, they may have proved almost detrimental to the *Faith* album, a mature, eclectic collection which straddled rock, gospel, R&B and jazz and which saw George being mentioned alongside music giants such as Madonna, Prince and Michael Jackson.

> VIDEOS ARE 50 PER CENT OF THE PLAN. BUT IF YOU WANT TO PROVE YOURSELF, YOU HAVE TO GO TO ALL THESE PLACES"
>
> GEORGE MICHAEL

Seeking sanctuary: blocking out the world with his Walkman on the bullet train in Japan during the Faith tour, February 1988

The album was a colossus. It topped the UK album chart and spawned six singles; in the US it spent 12 weeks at No.1 on the Billboard chart, and four of its singles hit the top spot. The tour kept him on the road for nine months: "Videos are 50 per cent of the plan. But if you want to prove yourself as an artist, you have to go to all these places," he told MTV. But he later described the tour as "bad trip number two".

Yet again, George had created a persona in which he would feel imprisoned. Without the support of Andrew and the Wham! family, his feelings of isolation and loneliness were compounded, leaving him overexposed and mentally vulnerable.

George retreated from the public view after the tour to work on his next album, which he vowed to present in a markedly different way than *Faith*, spending the remainder of the Eighties laying himself bare on an introspective collection of songs in which he felt that everything he had to say was included in the record's lyrics. This time, he told his record company, he would not promote the album, instead leaving the music to speak for itself.

Having achieved fame and fortune and yet having found himself creatively and personally unfulfilled, his next endeavour, George knew, required a different approach… regardless of the consequences.

CLASSIC POP PRESENTS

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CLASSIC ALBUM

FANTASTIC

WHAM!

SPEEDOS, SHUTTLECOCKS AND EXUBERANT, LIFE-AFFIRMING TUNES – WHEN GEORGE MICHAEL AND ANDREW RIDGELEY EXPLODED ONTO THE SCENE WITH THEIR DEBUT ALBUM, THE POP WORLD DIDN'T QUITE KNOW WHAT HAD HIT IT…

MARK LINDORES

Let us take you to a place where membership's a smiling face. In December 1982, Wham! made their debut on *Top Of The Pops*, performing their second single, *Young Guns (Go For It!)*, an appearance that encapsulated everything with which they'd later become synonymous. With their clean-cut looks, catchy hooks and irresistible sense of fun, that watershed performance catapulted them into the homes – and hearts – of teenage girls nationwide, firmly establishing them as (shuttlecock jokes aside) the perfect pop package.

George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley's ascent from the DHSS to *TOTP* had been a rapid one. In their early days, the pair would divide their time between songwriting and signing on. After their ska excursion they were joined by Shirlie Holliman, Ridgeley's then-girlfriend, and the three of them would choreograph dance routines, which they'd perform at local nightclubs.

"It was so much fun," recalls Holliman. "The three of us got on brilliantly – they became my world. We'd all go dancing together, and Wham! started out as an extension of that. They were great times but I sometimes felt like a spare part next to George – his talent overawed me, and still does. He was the organiser, and Andrew had the charisma."

An obviously gifted musician, Michael took on the bulk of the songwriting duties. The duo wanted to be as big as possible in as short a time as possible, and Ridgeley reasoned that allowing Michael to write the material was the way to achieve that. While Ridgeley's role in Wham! has been endlessly debated over the years, Simon Napier-Bell, who managed the band from 1983-86, insists that he was integral to their success.

"Andrew was the image," he explains. "Wham! was two lads around town – heterosexual and having fun. George invented the image of the band from observing Andrew. He then chose to act out the role of the second of the two lads around town. Sure, George wrote the songs, but songwriters can be hired or recruited. The one essential of any group is its personality, its image, and that was pure Andrew. Without him, Wham! could never have existed."

Inspired by the music they were hearing at clubs such as London's Le Beat Route – the likes of Chic, the Bee Gees and Earth, Wind & Fire – the pair decided to record a demo tape. They hired a Portastudio for £20 and recorded four of the tracks they'd written in Ridgeley's parents' living room. The tape was rejected by all of the major labels, but a chance meeting with an old friend in London's Three Crowns pub gave them their break.

Mark Dean, a local music executive, had made a name for himself in A&R, having discovered Soft Cell and ABC. Now, having set up Innervision, he offered Wham! a deal, which Michael and Ridgeley – anxious that this would be their one chance at fame – accepted. They went straight into the studio to lay down the four tracks from their demo, as well as a solo composition from Michael called *Young Guns (Go For It!)*.

At this point, Michael, Ridgeley and Holliman were joined by a new backing singer/dancer, Dee C Lee. "I was working as an in-house session singer at EMI Publishing, recording maybe three or four tracks a day for the songwriters signed," she tells *Classic Pop*. "Someone from Innervision contacted EMI about a new boyband that wanted two female singers – one black and

TRACKLISTING

SIDE A

Bad Boys

A Ray Of Sunshine

Love Machine

Wham Rap! (Enjoy What You Do)

SIDE B

Club Tropicana

Nothing Looks The Same In The Light

Come On!

Young Guns (Go For It!)

THE PLAYERS

RELEASED
9 July 1983
LABEL Innervision
PRODUCED BY
Steve Brown, George Michael and Bob Carter
ENGINEERS
Tony Taverner
RECORDED AT
Maison Rouge Studios, London
PERSONNEL
George Michael – vocals, background vocals, keyboards; Andrew Ridgeley – guitar; Shirlie Holliman – background vocals; Dee C Lee – background vocals; Katie Kissoon – background vocals; Raoul – horn; Robert Ahwai – guitar; Jess Bailey – keyboards; Baps – horn; Guy Barker – horn; Graham Broad – drums; Bob Carter – keyboards; Jimmy Chambers – background vocals; George Chandler – background vocals; Paul Cox – horn; Chris Craymer – photography; Geoff Daley – horn; Martin Drover – horn; Anne Dudley – keyboards; Andy Duncan – drums, percussion; Deon Estus – bass; Tommy Eyre – keyboards; Colin Graham – horn; Linda Hayes – background vocals; Chris Hunter – horn; Tony Jackson – background vocals; Josie James – background vocals; Luis Jardim – percussion; Brad Lang – bass; Stevie Lange – background vocals; Roddy Lorimer – horn; John McKenzie – bass; Iain MacKintosh – horn; Sylvia Mason – background vocals; Tony Moroni – percussion; Dave Mortimer – shouts; Trevor Murrell – drums; Paul Ridgeley – guitar, shouts and Ian Ritchie – horn

one white. I met them and we just clicked. They were really young and innocent, very sweet and great fun.

"Recording *Fantastic* was great – although I'd worked in studios before, this was a new experience for us all, and so exciting. George particularly had driving passion and ambition – and, of course, the songs were brilliant. I knew they were going to be huge."

Wham Rap! (Enjoy What You Do) was released as Wham!'s debut single in June 1982. A fusion of white pop and black soul music (a formula that would inform the sound of George Michael's records throughout the rest of his career), and incorporating rap, at that time a new concept in music, the song became a big club hit. Many DJs believed the track to be the work of a hot new act from New York, until Wham! turned up to perform it.

Having built up a following from their days performing their dance routines in clubs, the band embarked on a gruelling PA tour of those clubs to promote *Wham Rap!*. The image of two pretty, bare-chested white boys in leather jackets and skin-tight jeans indulging in flirty dancing with Lee and Holliman went down a storm.

"Those club tours were extremely hard work – sometimes, five or six shows a night – but we enjoyed all of it," Lee recalls. "As it was a new and fresh experience, it didn't really feel like work. We were always surprised by the fantastic reaction from the audiences, and became more confident with every show."

> "Recording *Fantastic* was great – this was a new experience for us all and so exciting. George particularly had driving passion and ambition – and, of course, the songs were brilliant. I knew they were going to be huge" DEE C LEE

"Those PAs were the best practice in the world," George later said. "They were awful and amateur, but we had to do them; there was no way we could make those dance routines up in my mum's living room and expect them to translate straight away onto live television."

Although they prepared the band for performing in front of live audiences, the PAs failed to translate into sales and *Wham Rap! (Enjoy What You Do)* peaked at No.105 in the UK. Wham! were still perceived as a club act, and needed to transcend that. Ironically, it was while performing their second single, *Young Guns (Go For It!)*, at one of London's most celebrated clubs that they got the opportunity to do that.

"Someone from the BBC spotted us in Stringfellows and invited us onto *Saturday Superstore*," says Holliman. "It all escalated from

THE BIG PICTURE
THE VIDEOS

WHAM RAP! (ENJOY WHAT YOU DO)

DIRECTOR: CHRIS GABRIN

Escape from the domestic and the humdrum was the theme for Wham's first-ever vid, with George pirouetting chirpily past early morning shoppers to liberate Andrew from his disapproving mum and dad. Cut to the chorus, where Ridgeley too dons a symbolic leather jacket and the pair join Dee and Shirlie for some synchronised moves.
vimeo.com/126750201

YOUNG GUNS (GO FOR IT!)

DIRECTOR: TIM POPE

Wham!'s teen-mag world cannily moves from living room to nightclub, where Andrew plays the put-upon bridegroom-in-waiting, Shirlie his possessive fiancée and George the spreader of the single-life gospel, all intercut with flashbacks of the boys frolicking in the West End (with Andrew puking in a bin). He must choose: married life, or more laddish good times? Woo! George wins!
youtu.be/doZ6wOJHu_E

BAD BOYS

DIRECTOR: MIKE BRADY

More rite-of-passage rebellion, this time fronted by a sepia-tinged filmette of a wartime family with a catapult-wielding little boy who grows to a teen and has it out with his so-conventional parents. Cue American cars, more macho studded garb and stylish dance moves amongst clouds of dry ice. Great fun, but all a bit predictable…
youtu.be/hktHI4fGydE

CLUB TROPICANA

DIRECTOR: DUNCAN GIBBINS

Filmed mostly at the infamous Pikes Hotel in Ibiza, later the scene of Freddie Mercury's beyond-hedonistic 41st birthday party, *Club Tropicana* was much more the (airline) ticket, with Dee, Shirlie, George and Andrew playing out a sexy and cocktail-soaked Balearic holiday flirtation, with that neat identity reveal towards the end.
youtu.be/WYX0sjP6Za8

Andrew, Dee, Shirlie and George in Ibiza for the filming of the *Club Tropicana* video
© Photoshot

there. I went shopping in Watford with George after the programme had finished, and people were staring and pointing at us."

Wham! were back at the BBC when an act pulled out of *Top Of The Pops* at the last minute. Despite *Young Guns* languishing outside the UK Top 40, they were booked on the basis of the positive reaction to their *Saturday Superstore* performance. This proved to be a career-defining moment and within weeks, *Young Guns*, a joyous ode to single life, was in the UK Top Five – their first hit.

A hasty re-release of *Wham Rap! (Enjoy What You Do)* followed it into the Top 10, peaking at No.8 in February 1983. With the pressure on, Michael delivered *Bad Boys*, a tale of teen rebellion that hit No.2 in the UK, though the songwriter admits it was his creative nadir. "I wrote to a formula for *Bad Boys*, trying to replicate something else," he sighs. "That's something I'd never done before and have never done since."

His disappointment with *Bad Boys* was compounded by the frustration he was experiencing with Innervision's miserly hand-outs. They enlisted Nomis Management, a company set up by newcomer Jazz Summers and industry veteran Simon Napier-Bell

(who'd previously managed Marc Bolan and Japan), to help release them from their contract. "I was confident that we could get them out of it," says Napier-Bell. "Contracts as bad as that can't stand up in British courts. But it wasn't easy – money was needed to fight it, and they didn't have any. And we were up against CBS, who had more money than any other record company in the world."

Wham!'s next single, *Club Tropicana*, marked a number of departures. The angsty social commentary of the first three singles was replaced with a fun, breezy tale of sun, sea and sand, with its now-iconic video – casting the duo as airline pilots living it up – marking the end of their "baby biker" image. Another departure was Dee C Lee. "I didn't want to just dance and look good, and I had all these ideas in my head," she tells us. "I was offered a solo deal by CBS and I'd already been working with The Style Council, who encouraged me to be creative and experiment with my voice. So I made solo records and joined The Style Council full-time." Pepsi DeMacque joined Wham! as her replacement.

Wham released *Fantastic* album on 9 July 1983. A cohesive collection of frothy, feelgood funk, it received mixed reviews but was a smash, going straight to No.1 in the UK and spending 113 weeks in the Top 100. The album consisted of the singles, a reprise of *Come On!* from their original demo, two new songs (*A Ray Of Sunshine* and *Nothing Looks The Same In The Light*) and a cover of The Miracles' *Love Machine*. *Careless Whisper* failed to make the cut: "It didn't fit in, either song-wise or image-wise," explains Napier-Bell. "And I think George thought it might be something he'd use later to launch a solo career."

Due to legal wrangles, Wham! found themselves in limbo, unable to record or release any new material. Napier-Bell booked the band on a UK tour to retain their profile and raise funds to fight their impending court battle with Innervision. The 32-date Club Fantastic tour was a huge success; every show was a sell-out and "Whamania" hit the headlines, with thousands of fans besieging the group's every move – and Michael and Ridgeley's faces (and bodies) beginning to appear in teen mags and tabloids.

"The tour was chaos," says Holliman. "All these fans wanting to get in with George and Andrew. They'd ask Pepsi and I to pass on messages for them, with phone numbers and underwear attached. But it didn't work!"

CLASSIC ALBUM

MAKE IT BIG

WHAM!

DITCHING THE BABY BIKER IMAGE AND BRATTY ATTITUDE OF THEIR DEBUT, WHAM!'S SECOND ALBUM SAW THEM EMBRACE A POPPIER SOUND AND A MORE COLOURFUL IMAGE. IT COST THEM CREDIBILITY, BUT EARNED THEM THEIR RIGHTFUL PLACE AS ONE OF THE BIGGEST ACTS OF THE EIGHTIES...

MARK LINDORES

As the curtain came down on the Club Fantastic Tour in November 1983, it also brought an end to the first chapter in Wham!'s success story. Having discarded their leather jackets and 'baby biker' image, the breezy fun and sunshine of fourth single *Club Tropicana* had proved to be the perfect fit for them and defined their future direction. The future, it seemed, was looking very bright.

However, finding themselves locked in litigation hell with their record label Innervision, they faced a fraught and lengthy battle to free themselves of a contract which amounted to little more than professional slavery (a term which would rear its head again later in George's career). As manager Simon Napier-Bell battled to resolve the issue on their behalf, George and Andrew were dispatched to Studio Miraval in the South of France to begin work on material for their second album. They had worked non-stop throughout a whirlwind two years, and this trip was intended to give them an opportunity to recharge their batteries for when their legal problems were resolved and they were free to continue making music.

"That break turned out to be a really positive thing," George wrote in his autobiography, *Bare*. "I had been working very hard and I knew I needed to sit back and collect my thoughts, as a person and creatively, so that I could write the second album. I needed that breathing space. It would have killed most bands, but I never doubted that the material I came up with would be good enough for us to come back up."

Once a settlement was reached in March 1984, work began in earnest on rebuilding Wham! What had started out as a relaxed atmosphere quickly changed into a tense environment as George felt the pressure to deliver a solid second album. New label Epic, well aware of the fickleness of the music industry, made it clear that they were keen to progress as quickly as possible while the group was still riding an initial wave of popularity; they wanted a single almost immediately and an album before the end of the year, as they already had it planned as one of the year's biggest festive sellers.

While the battle with Innervision had bonded George and Andrew in unison against their former label, cracks began to appear in their partnership as Andrew's partying and drinking threatened to spiral out of control. The press proved relentless. "I suppose

TRACKLISTING

SIDE A

Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go

Everything She Wants

Heartbeat

Like A Baby

SIDE B

Freedom

If You Were There

Credit Card Baby

Careless Whisper

THE PLAYERS

RELEASED
23 October 1984

LABEL Epic

PRODUCED BY
George Michael

ENGINEERS
Chris Porter; Paul Gomersall (assistant)

RECORDED AT
Studio Miraval, France and Sarm West Studios, London

PERSONNEL
George Michael – lead vocals, background vocals, keyboards; Andrew Ridgeley – guitar, background vocals; Hugh Burns – guitar; Deon Estus – bass guitar; Trevor Morrell – drums; Tommy Eyre – keyboards; Andy Richards – keyboards; Anne Dudley – keyboards; Danny Cummings – percussion; Colin Graham – trumpet; David Baptiste – saxophone; Steve Gregory – saxophone; Pepsi & Shirlie – background vocals

> "I suppose they might be looking for a kind of Rod Stewart rock'n'roll figure. I do the things most people do – I just get photographed. It's Randy Andy, Arrogant Andrew… maybe I should change my name to Trevor" **ANDREW RIDGELEY**

they might be looking for some Rod Stewart rock'n'roll kind of figure, but I do the things most people do on a Saturday night – I just get photographed doing it," he protested to *Smash Hits*. "But the press seem to have an angle for everything: Randy Andy! Arrogant Andrew! Aggressive Andrew! Or the latest, Dribbling Andrew! I just can't win. Maybe I should change my name to Trevor."

While George beat himself up over meeting deadlines, Andrew was seemingly oblivious, essentially using the break as an extended holiday by inviting friends to visit and living the superstar lifestyle without, it seemed, putting in the work. The final straw came when *The Tube*'s TV crew arrived. As they waited to interview George and Andrew, the latter was being bathed by his friends in order to wake him up as he'd got too drunk to do the job himself. Though he recovered and was able to be his cocky, charming self once the cameras were rolling, Andrew was warned to get his act together after the interview by George, who was beginning to feel taken advantage of.

Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go was released as the first single from the album on 14th May 1984. The track was a sugar-coated throwback to the Fifties rock'n'roll adored by teenagers, right down to its "jitterbug" vocal line and finger-clicking harmony. The boys were overjoyed when the song became their first No.1 single. Although it would be regarded as one of Wham!'s signature songs, George was disdainful of it later on, branding it "naff" and "stupid" and citing it as one of the main reasons Wham! were so derided by their peers and critics.

Careless Whisper, a moody ballad with an instantly recognisable sax hook, was an attempt to redress the balance. Released as George's debut solo single, the song revealed him to be capable of producing material with a maturity which belied his 21 years. Like its predecessor, *Careless Whisper* topped the charts on both sides of the Atlantic.

THE BIG PICTURE

THE VIDEOS

WAKE ME UP BEFORE YOU GO-GO

DIRECTOR: ANDY MORAHAN

George once said that the only common thread running through *Make It Big* was "the image, which was consistently naff". To George, the *Wake Me Up* video was Wham!'s nadir (along with *Bad Boys*). From his Princess Di hairdo, hoop earrings and day-glo sportswear, what the world saw as fun and kitsch, he only saw as cringe-inducing.

youtu.be/pIgZ7gMze7A

CARELESS WHISPER

DIRECTOR: DUNCAN GIBBIN

Club Tropicana's jack-the-lad on a boys' holiday in Ibiza now thought he was grown up, but his cheating ways suggested otherwise. Shot in Miami, George is a remorseful philanderer who realises he's screwed up his chance at happiness. The video famously went over budget as George had to fly in his hairdresser after the humidity turned his hair into an uncontrollable mane.

youtu.be/izGwDsrQ1eQ

FREEDOM

DIRECTOR: ANDY MORAHAN

Unusually, *Freedom* was released without a video, with the boys doing the rounds of music shows to promote the song instead. However, when it was released in America in 1985, Wham! were on tour and couldn't promote it personally, so a video was put together using footage shot for a documentary about their landmark trip to China.

youtu.be/BFw0s-jy53A

EVERYTHING SHE WANTS

DIRECTOR: ANDY MORAHAN & LINDSAY ANDERSON

After camping it up in the Swiss Alps for the *Last Christmas* video, the song's flip, *Everything She Wants*, was given a wholly different treatment. Shot entirely in black and white (as would all Wham! videos from this point), a close-up of George (sporting new "designer stubble") was interlaced with footage from The Big Tour.

youtu.be/Yf_Lwe6p-Cg

"I never doubted that the material I came up with would be good enough," claimed George

© John Rodgers/Redferns

"It's more of a black LP than the last one was. It's a black/pop LP as opposed to a black/disco LP. It's been derived from so many areas… I've just written what I liked, and got rid of my influences all in one go" GEORGE MICHAEL

In August 1984, *Freedom* completed George's hat trick of No.1 singles. The song, a bombastic Motown pastiche, ensured that when *Make It Big* followed weeks later, it was indeed the smash that Epic had hoped for. As well as the three singles, the album featured the languid *Like A Baby*, an Isley Brothers cover in *If You Were There*, and two more pure pop confections influenced by Sixties soul music and Phil Spector's Wall of Sound, *Credit Card Baby* and *Heartbeat*. "It's more of a black LP than the last one was," George told *Record Mirror*. "It's a black/pop LP as opposed to a black/disco LP. It's been derived from so many areas… I've just written what I liked and got rid of my influences all in one go."

Completing the album was *Everything She Wants*, a throbbing synth-based dance track which towered over everything Wham! had released previously. Later released as a double A-side with *Last Christmas*, it remains the biggest-selling single not to reach the top spot in Britain. In the US, it gave Wham! their third No.1.

Make It Big was a huge success, heading album charts around the world. Though ecstatic, George was furious that the critics couldn't (or wouldn't) see past Wham!'s image and listen (without prejudice) to his music at face value. Though he feigned bravado, the criticisms affected him deeply.

Going on to sell in excess of 10 million copies, *Make It Big* was the pinnacle of Wham!'s success, propelling them to a level of fame in which the music became almost irrelevant. Like The Beatles before them, Wham! had reached a level where they weren't listened to – they were screamed at. One of the biggest bands in the world, they had made it bigger than they had dreamt possible. ■

© Owen Franken/Corbis via Getty Images

Wham! at the Great Wall of China, April 1985. "I can't imagine why they built it – I can't see who would want to invade this place," Andrew reportedly quipped

© Getty Images

Wham!-era Andrew: "The group is about my friendship with George. It couldn't be the group without the pair of us. Performance is the part I enjoy most"

THE VANISHED

ANDREW RIDGELEY WAS A MAN WHO SOMEHOW MADE BEING A POP STAR LOOK UTTERLY EFFORTLESS. HOW DID THE SUPPOSED PASSENGER IN WHAM! DISAPPEAR ALMOST COMPLETELY FROM SIGHT… AND WAS HE, IN REALITY, FAR WISER THAN MANY THOUGHT?

JOHN EARLS

Had he followed a more conventional path, Andrew Ridgeley would be a regular on TV these days – rustling up perfect fondant potatoes on *Celebrity Masterchef,* perhaps, or competing with bravery and charm on *I'm A Celebrity* and winding up finishing third. Yet beneath Ridgeley's glossy and carefree Wham! image there may have lain a sharper and more canny media mind than most gave him credit for.

A 1994 episode of David Baddiel and Frank Skinner's BBC2 ladfest *Fantasy Football* is the most typical glimpse of what the singer so often lazily stereotyped as 'the talentless one' may have had in store had he chosen to carry on following the TV show route. Looking distinctly out of place in a sharp suit and tie, Arsenal fan Ridgeley sits next to Eddie Large and Basil Brush, indulgently chuckling along to the fox puppet's queasy quips about Indians. It is not a suitable setting for a man who was such an important part of Wham!'s massive popularity, a man who helped provide a setting for George Michael's pop gems with such a light and carefree touch.

Aside from that, 2005's documentary *A Different Story* – and *Good Morning Britain*, which we'll get on to later – Ridgeley's appearances have been rare. He spoke eloquently and emotionally about the loss of George in December 2017 to the *Mail On Sunday*, but ever since his solo album *Son Of Albert* flopped in 1990 his absence from pop has been almost complete. Without bothering to make a grand statement, Andrew Ridgeley – 40 million record sales and all – decided that the chatshow circuit or an industry role were a bind. Worth an estimated £20 million, Ridgeley need never work again… so he hasn't.

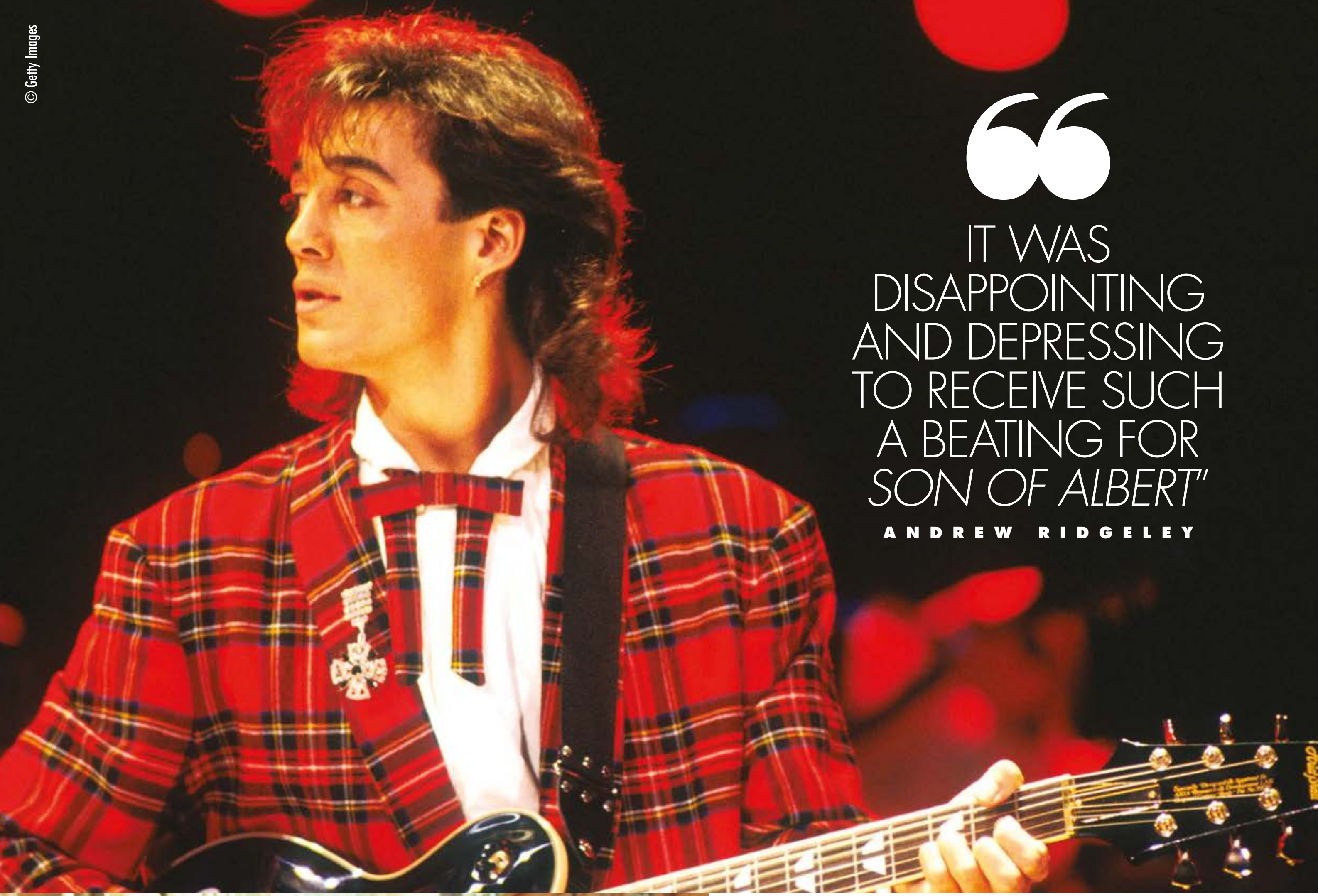
But just how mysterious is Ridgeley's existence? Is he pop's own JD Salinger-style recluse? Or is he simply living out every reluctant pop star's dream: enjoying a genuinely normal life, having subtly retreated from the spotlight so that he can kick back and do whatever he wants, in private?

In retrospect, for keen-eyed fans, clues that Andrew wasn't planning to stick around the industry were in place early on. On BBC1's *Wogan* in 1984, Wham! were asked what they'd do when they split. Without pause, Ridgeley responded: "I'll retire with grace." For a 21-year-old, it's a remarkably prescient answer.

It's well documented that Andrew was widely considered more charismatic and sexier than George when the pair met at Bushey Meads secondary school in Hertfordshire. He may have been more of a pin-up, but Ridgeley recognised where the real songwriting talent and ambition lay, even in their first band as 16-year-olds, five-piece ska wannabes The Executive.

"We made a decision early on that George would be the main songwriter," Ridgeley has said. "It was very apparent that he was better at it." Thus began the media image that Ridgeley was the glamorous playboy, while Michael was the shy geek with all the talent. It's a portrayal Ridgeley was happy enough to go along with, admitting he was "pretty much along for the ride", living out his childhood dream of being in a successful band without necessarily doing too much of the accompanying graft.

Such self-deprecation does Ridgeley a disservice. For all Michael's undoubted skills, in the solo portion of his career his songs rarely managed to sound as effortless and carefree as they were in Wham! Even if he was only the counterbalance who stopped the tightly-wound Michael from



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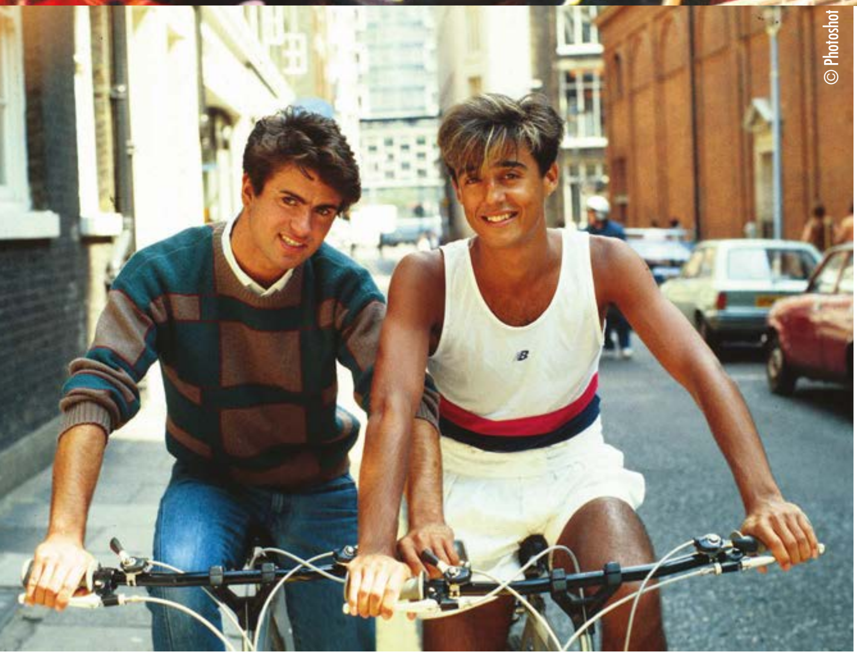
> IT WAS DISAPPOINTING AND DEPRESSING TO RECEIVE SUCH A BEATING FOR *SON OF ALBERT*"
>
> ANDREW RIDGELEY



© Photoshot

It was decided early on that George Michael should be the main songwriter in Wham!, but Andrew was the perfect right hand man

becoming too stressed, Ridgeley performed that role brilliantly. TV interviews show the pair constantly laughing, with Ridgeley often interjecting a well-timed one-liner if his bandmate becomes a touch too earnest. Such exuberance is writ large on *Fantastic* and *Make It Big*, while ever since those two albums Michael was given free rein to his more serious side.

Although Ridgeley was most likely already planning his escape from publicity, at least he was able to enjoy it while it lasted, and on his own terms. Between albums, Ridgeley was asked by *Smash Hits*' Neil Tennant about Wham! shoving shuttlecocks down their shorts on the *Fantastic* tour. "The only time we act the part of pop stars is when we're on stage," Ridgeley explained. "If you start acting like one in a restaurant, it's the beginning of the end." He knew how to stay grounded, even when stumbling out of clubs with a succession of models, as was his wont until falling for Bananarama's Keren Woodward.

Ridgeley's family is middle-class – his dad Albert worked for Canon, mum Jennifer was a teacher. He inherited his dapper dress sense and gentlemanly demeanour (not to mention an album title) from Albert. Ridgeley's clipped speaking voice harks back to Fifties BBC. Despite the tabloid attention, he managed to stay one step apart, remaining aloof and essentially unknowable.

Wham! broke up in 1986, both singers sharing the inescapable feeling that the band had nowhere left to go. In *A Different Story*, Ridgeley says: "Wham! was about being two young men, and we couldn't see how to carry that on into adulthood." At least the Wham! break-up was about as amicable as any music industry split could be, and the pair always remained good friends.

The day after Wham!'s farewell gig at Wembley, Ridgeley told the BBC he was planning a break from music "for a year or two". In the event, *Son Of Albert* arrived four years later, when Michael was more famous than ever thanks to *Faith*. The album appeared to confirm the public's perception of Ridgeley as an idler. Its 10 songs include both the soaraway No.58 smash *Shake* and its 12" remix, plus covers of songs by Chic and The Everly Brothers (tellingly, the Everlys didn't exactly hog the spotlight either). It didn't dent the UK Top 75. And yet, if Ridgeley's reinvention as a Fifties rock'n'roller was no *Faith*, it's as good as the work of retro popsters such

as Willy Moon. *Shake,* in particular – a spirited bop ripe for a Jack White cover – deserved better.

All in black and wearing a cowboy hat, Ridgeley looked slightly dazed during an appearance on *Wogan* the week that *Son Of Albert* was released, admitting the response to it would determine his future. "I've got a few years in music yet," he insisted. "Further down the line, I can see myself getting into producing for others… I know where my talents lie."

The fact that *Son Of Albert* was a commercial and critical failure simply served to hasten Andrew's vow of six years earlier. He chose to retire with grace. In the *Hello* interview, Ridgeley said: "It was disappointing and depressing to receive such a beating for *Son Of Albert.* The whole thing had been tongue-in-cheek and was misconstrued, but perhaps it was ill-conceived style-wise and in the timing… I've done bits and pieces since, but for my own satisfaction. They'll never be released."

Shortly after releasing *Son Of Albert*, Ridgeley hooked up with Keren Woodward, moving with her – and her young son Thomas – to a farm in Cornwall. The lived there happily, with Woodward wisecrackingly summarising Ridgeley's life as: "Surfing. Pint. Dinner." Sadly, to the best of our knowledge, the couple called quits on their 25-year relationship in 2017, though both still live in the area.

Every few years, a "where are they now?" feature appears in the tabloids, but Ridgeley's new life doesn't fit the usual pigeonholes of being bitter, a loner and/or battling addictions. In 2013, *Classic Pop* hopefully wrote to Ridgeley at his farm, seeking an interview. A few days later, he emailed from his personal account (rare for any pop star). His reply simply read: "Thank you for your kind and polite letter. However, I respectfully decline your offer."

That's "thanks but no thanks", then… and he's right to be wary. In June 2018 Andrew appeared on *Good Morning Britain* to promote an admirable project – a 1800km cycle ride though Europe, a tough event which he had completed several times before, helping raise large sums for underprivileged young people via the charity Dallaglio RugbyWorks. Interviewer Piers Morgan zeroed in on how Ridgeley might be feeling after George's death; Andrew gently declined discussing the matter in depth, and tried to steer the chat back to charity matters. Morgan, appallingly, followed up the next day with an insulting tweet, calling Ridgeley "an insufferable d**k".

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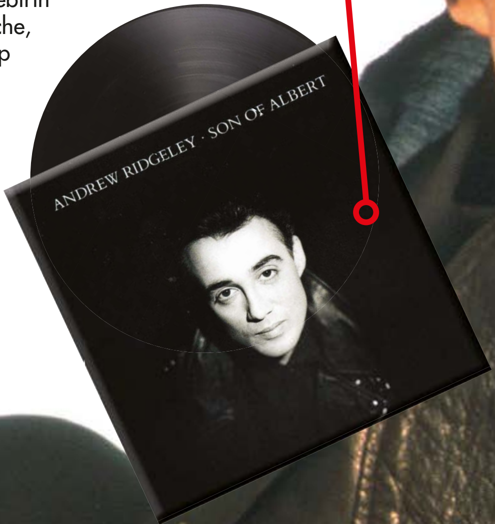
After this staggeringly small-minded unpleasantness, the level of Andrew's willingness to interact with journalists – even, sadly, well-meaning ones devoted to the finest music of the Eighties and beyond – is probably less than high. Still, we'd hope that Andrew Ridgeley knows that all true Wham! fans regard him with enormous affection, a twinkle… and respect. ■

Andrew at the time of *Son Of Albert*, which received very poor reviews, including a notorious half-star score from a well-known US music mag

© Photoshot

SON OF ALBERT

Naming his sole solo album after his father, Ridgeley claimed his rebirth as a retro rocker was a pastiche, a fact born out by the taut pop sheen that came courtesy of Jamiroquai producer Max Heyes. Cancelled single *Mexico* and *Flame* – penned with school pal David Austin – are smart, infectious grooves whose fusion of genres would likely fare rather better now than in 1990. Unfairly dismissed at the time, it's a patchy but adventurous and uplifting little treasure.



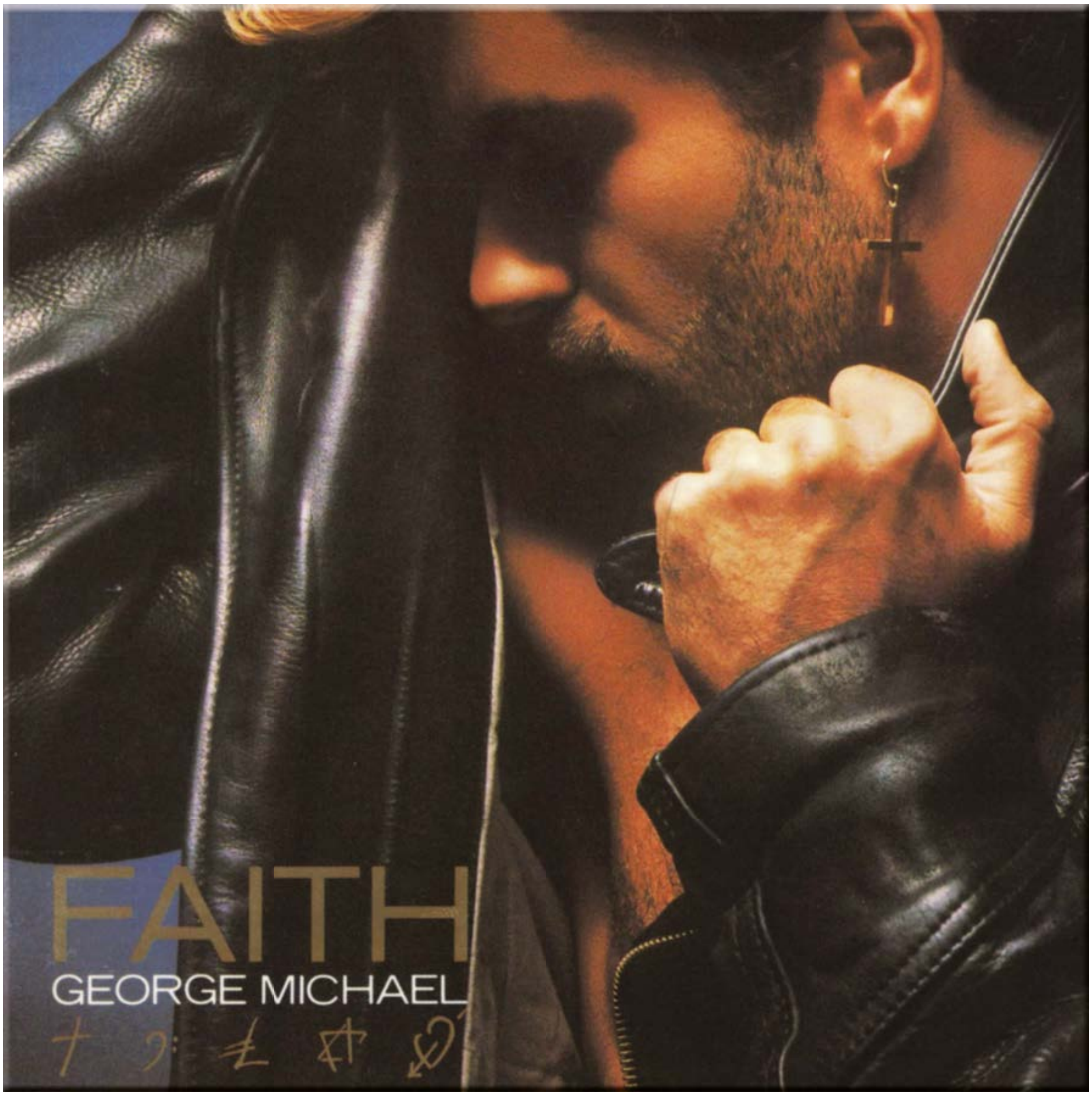
CLASSIC ALBUM

FAITH

GEORGE MICHAEL

SHEDDING HIS PAST, GEORGE DITCHED THE FUN AND SUNSHINE OF WHAM!, LOOKED INWARDS FOR INSPIRATION AND BARED ALL IN ORDER TO CREATE HIS FIRST TRUE MASTERPIECE…

MARK LINDORES



It's 28 June 1986 and 72,000 fans are bidding an emotional farewell to Wham! at The Final concert at Wembley Stadium. George Michael was experiencing mixed emotions. On the one hand, he was genuinely moved because "I knew inside that this would be the last time that I would ever perform some of those songs live". On the other, he was experiencing a sense of liberation that he could finally channel his energy and emotions into making the album he truly wanted to make.

The previous 12 months had been a time of professional highs, with Wham! experiencing a newfound critical appraisal to match their continued commercial success, but this was compounded by the lowest of lows in George's private life following the break-up of a relationship. "It was the worst feeling in the world," he told *Rolling Stone* magazine of his subsequent depression. "Waking up and just wishing that somehow you could just go back to sleep and the day would disappear and you wouldn't wake up. I felt like that for ages."

Andrew and George bid farewell to Wham! at Wembley Stadium, 1986

The failure of his relationship, at the time the most significant of his life, had a profound effect on George, altering his views on everything, particularly his career. In late 1985, having begun laying down tracks for Wham!'s third studio album, he decided to end the group. Although songs such as *I'm Your Man* and *The Edge Of Heaven* were among the strongest of Wham!'s career, George felt that the direction in which he was heading as a songwriter was increasingly at odds with everything Wham! stood for.

"I was finding it increasingly difficult to write for the group image," George admitted. "I was writing much more personal lyrics, and it felt increasingly strange for me to be singing those lyrics as head of this two-man group. Things were going downhill because we were growing up; neither of us were teenagers anymore. There was never any question that Wham! was going to end earlier than a group's normal lifespan because it was not a musical entity – it was an

THE TRACKS

1 FAITH
The church organ playing Wham!'s *Freedom* sounded the death knell of George's former group while symbolising how he felt to be embarking on a solo career. This intro gives way to an upbeat rockabilly track, based on the familiar Bo Diddley beat. Released as the second single, *Faith* reached No.2 in the UK and topped the charts in the US, becoming the biggest-selling single of 1988.

2 FATHER FIGURE
Far from being the gorgeous, gospel-inflected ballad we know today, *Father Figure* began life as an upbeat dance song, but George stripped it back and removed the snare from the mix, leaving it as a ballad. Sung in a husky, lower-register voice, the sensual track hinted at the turmoil around George's sexuality with lyrics such as *"That's all I wanted/ But sometimes love can be mistaken for a crime"*. Although the song gave George his third solo US No.1, it was his first single to (just) miss the UK Top 10.

3 I WANT YOUR SEX (1&2)
Despite being tame by today's sex-drenched standards, *I Want Your Sex* was the subject of a huge amount of controversy when it was released in May 1987 as the first single from the album. Given the climate at the time, with the spread of HIV and AIDS at its terrifying peak and George still regarded as an act predominantly aimed at the teen market, the release of a song so controversial was branded irresponsible. George defended himself with the claim that the funky R&B track celebrated a monogamous relationship (*"Sex is natural/ Sex is fun/ Sex is best when it's one on one"*). *I Want Your Sex* was released in three "acts" – *Lust*, *Brass In Love* and *A Last Request*, the latter included on the CD version of *Faith*. The song became a Top 10 hit on both sides of the Atlantic, and its US success was bolstered by an appearance in *Beverly Hills Cop II*.

4 ONE MORE TRY
He may still have been only 24, but George's lyrics – written from the point of view of a man wracked by the fear of being hurt again – were delivered with complete conviction, as was the vocal itself. His agonising indecisiveness is played out meticulously over the course of the ballad's six-minute-plus running time before he succumbs at the end and agrees to give the relationship "one more try" – the last line being the only time the title is sung. As well as reaching No.8 in the UK, it gave him another US No.1 single.

5 HARD DAY
Hard Day is probably the most dated-sounding song on the record (especially compared to the timeless ballads). An electro-funk experiment, the track features synths and sequencers plus voice-changing studio effects; towards the end George is made to sound almost female, much like Prince on the "Camille" songs on *Sign O' The Times*.

6 HAND TO MOUTH
While pop in the post-Live Aid late-Eighties saw pop stars increasingly developing a social conscience, George had been including social commentary into his lyrics since day one with tracks such as *Wham! Rap*. *Hand To Mouth* is a brief respite from love, sex and relationships, and saw him juxtaposing two stories of two Americans who had fallen on hard times – a prostitute, and a 25-year-old pushed to the edge who embarks on a shooting spree. Three decades later, the stories are still relevant.

7 LOOK AT YOUR HANDS
This track about domestic violence is stylistically akin to Wham!'s *Edge Of Heaven*, suggesting it was one of *Faith*'s earlier compositions, or even a planned track for the third Wham! album. *Look At Your Hands* continues the rockiness of that song with a bluesy feel courtesy of a blistering brass section and screaming sax.

8 MONKEY
On the surface it's a fun, polished pop song, but "monkey on your back" is slang for drug addiction. George called on US hit-makers Jam & Lewis to remix the song for its release as a single after he fell in love with their revamp of Janet Jackson's *Nasty*. *Monkey* became his fourth US No.1 single from the album (his eighth overall), equalling records set by Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston, but it stalled at No.13 in the UK.

9 KISSING A FOOL
Completing *Faith*'s trilogy of timeless classic ballads, the sublime, jazz-inflected *Kissing A Fool* set a precedent for George's future as a truly great balladeer. The lyric explores his insecurities about committing to a relationship; it was one of the first songs written for the album (and provided the original working title, until *Faith* usurped it). Reaching No.18 in the UK and No.5 in the US, the song was the lowest-charting single from *Faith*… but it was the sixth single from an album that had been on sale for over a year and which had already sold millions.

THE PLAYERS

GEORGE AND FRIENDS

Feeling an immense amount of pressure to prove himself with his debut solo effort, George assumed complete control of the record, writing, producing, arranging and playing everything he could himself, with occasional contributions from session musicians. Bassist Deon Estus and guitarist Hugh Burns had worked with Wham! and were enlisted to contribute to a couple of songs, while the horns had to be professionally done, but George was precise about the sound he wanted and did his best to generate as much as possible. "I understand music enough to play it and construct it so it sounds like a proper performance, but I can't play any of it live," he said. "The minimalism of some of it is because I didn't have the ability to play!"

image entity. It was a group that was based around an image and music, but one wouldn't work without the other. And for it to work, the image had to be two guys having a laugh, having a good time, and as soon as that got boring for us it would get boring for other people."

While George and Andrew had always been aware of Wham!'s shelf life, George admitted that his troubled personal life marked the beginning of the end for the group. "The actual Wham! split was definitely provoked by my emotional distress around that period," he mused. "It's hard to tell whether or not it would have happened at that time had it not been for that relationship failing. Maybe if I'd felt more secure, I would have felt no need to shake things up. But at the time I just wanted to make a clear start. Basically, I didn't want to be a star anymore, because I was feeling so sorry for myself."

After coming to a decision about the future of Wham!, plans were put in place for the band's last act. The songs recorded for the third album were released as *Music From The Edge Of Heaven,* and *The Final* greatest hits album was released in May 1986 to coincide with their farewell concert at Wembley Stadium.

While the concert truly marked the end of an era, it allowed George to throw himself into a new chapter as a solo artist. Having already achieved two solo No.1 singles with *Careless Whisper* in 1984 and *A Different Corner* earlier in 1986, both of which allowed him to explore a more mature direction than with Wham!, he was beginning to feel inspired again musically, particularly when afforded the opportunity to perform with his musical idols.

Having already forged a strong rapport with Elton John – he duetted with him at Live Aid, and provided backing vocals on *Nikita* and *Wrap Her Up* – and performed with Stevie Wonder and Smokey Robinson at a Motown anniversary concert, the ultimate honour came when George was invited to duet with soul queen Aretha Franklin on *I Knew You Were Waiting (For Me)*. As well as being another No.1 hit around the world, the true measure of the song's success was personal. "It proved to me that I was capable of standing onstage with a great singer and holding my own," he said. "Which was something I'd never really considered before."

This newfound confidence, coupled with a wealth of lyrical inspiration drawn from his personal problems, ignited a period of complete musical freedom, with George choosing to divide his time between London and Denmark to write and record his debut solo album.

Assuming complete control of the entire process, he wrote everything, produced everything and, thanks to some clever use of state-of-the-art studio equipment, managed to play almost every instrument eventually heard on the record. It was a personal breakthrough. "I was very excited musically, that I had my own voice, that I'd worked with Aretha Franklin and that everything had gone so well," he confirmed. "It was the freest time of my writing – I was like a kid in a sweet shop. I could do any period that I wanted, any style that I wanted, and I'd get a hearing. Not that people would buy everything… but however good or bad it was, it would get a hearing and it would still get played on the radio. We were still in the era where we expected more of records and we were allowed to do different things – and you could have incredibly unusual-sounding records reach No.1."

© Getty Images

> "I was very excited musically, that I had my own voice, that I'd worked with Aretha Franklin. It was the freest time of my writing. I was like a kid in a sweet shop" GEORGE MICHAEL

Ready for the world: George at the start of the Faith world tour, 1988

This creative freedom resulted in an accomplished set of songs that encompassed pop, rock, soul, R&B, jazz and funk, and while the main focus of the album was love, sex and relationships, he also tackled subjects such as domestic abuse, gun crime and prostitution.

One of the album's more daring tracks, the titillating, media-baiting slice of electro-funk that is *I Want Your Sex,* was released as the first single and drew criticism largely due to its title. It was promptly banned by the BBC, who were still suffering from the aftershock of Frankie Goes To Hollywood's *Relax* and seemed to baulk at anything remotely controversial.

Despite its title, the song was actually a paean to monogamous relationships, but its message was lost in translation. The furore cost George a No.1 single but it was still a sizeable hit (it peaked at No.3) and helped broaden his fanbase beyond the largely teenage fans that had followed his career since the Wham! days.

Released on 30 October 1987, *Faith* became an instant smash, topping the album charts internationally and selling over a million

THE BIG PICTURE
THE VIDEOS

I WANT YOUR SEX
DIRECTOR: ANDY MORAHAN

The video for *I Want Your Sex* was banned by the BBC and MTV for its risqué nature. Featuring George with his then-girlfriend Kathy Jeung in a clinch draped in satin sheets with some mild bondage and a scene in which George writes the words "Explore monogamy" with lipstick on her naked body, the video perfectly suited the track's sleazy funk.

youtu.be/r3AP26ywQsQ

FAITH
DIRECTOR: ANDY MORAHAN

Intended to give George a tougher image, the *Faith* video saw him adopt silver-tipped boots, ripped Levi's, a BSA leather jacket, shades and designer stubble, though he softened the look somewhat by adding a string of pearls under one epaulette. The look became one of his most famous, but he would symbolically set fire to the jacket in his *Freedom '90* video.

youtu.be/6Cs3PvmmvOE

FATHER FIGURE
DIRECTORS: GEORGE MICHAEL & ANDY MORAHAN

For *Father Figure*, George portrayed a brooding New York cab driver consumed with jealousy, loosely based on Robert De Niro's Travis Bickle character from *Taxi Driver*. In a hint of many George videos to come it featured supermodel Tania Coleridge, and earned the singer a Best Director prize at the 1988 MTV Awards alongside Andy Morahan.

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MONKEY
DIRECTOR: ANDY MORAHAN

After the powerful impact of the *Faith* and *I Want Your Sex* videos, the clips towards the end of the *Faith* era were much simpler. *Monkey* featured George by now moving away from his rocker look and sporting a white shirt, braces and a hat, dancing in front of a plain white backdrop. The video is elevated by footage taken from the Faith Tour.

youtu.be/kA9NNq_6N-w

copies in its first week in the US alone. While commercial appeal had never been a worry for George, the album was met by universal acclaim from the critics, who praised his bravery, his experimentalism and his balladry on an album, which saw him achieve his goal of matching the success of Michael Jackson, Prince, Madonna and Whitney Houston, the global superstars who were now his peers.

The release of the album marked the beginning of a lengthy period in which George would emerge as one of the biggest stars in the world. Following *I Want Your Sex, Faith* produced a string of hits that would not only ensure the album was a permanent fixture in the upper echelons of the charts worldwide for the next two years but would also set records that would stand for decades. The title track, *Father Figure, One More Try* and *Monkey* were all US No.1 singles and global hits, while *Kissing A Fool* became the album's swansong, giving him a record-breaking six-single run, fuelled by a gruelling 17-month world tour which visited the US, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, the Far East and Canada.

The album went on to achieve sales of over 20 million copies and was the biggest-selling album in America in 1988, with *Faith* also the biggest-selling single. Having achieved the biggest-selling single of the year with *Careless Whisper* in 1985, George was the only artist other than The Beatles to achieve the feat. The accolades continued come award season with George picking up three American Music Awards, a BPI Award and a Grammy for Album Of The Year, and he finally rounded off the *Faith* era in September 1989 when he was presented with MTV's Video Vanguard Award by no less than Madonna.

The success of the album and tour far exceeded anything George had envisioned. "I was very proud of the album but I never for one second thought it would be bigger than Wham!," he claimed. "I wanted success in America, but I didn't want to be the biggest thing of the year there. It was great for my ego but all the way through I was thinking, 'oh, what are you doing?'"

© Getty Images

George in Australia: the 137-date Faith world tour took almost a year and a half to complete

"I think I'm already regarded as one of the main pop writers of the Eighties, but I want to be regarded as that through the Nineties. I think my music deserves it" GEORGE MICHAEL

Having craved global success and done everything possible to achieve it, George was to find that being the biggest star in the world came at a price and was, ironically, faithless and empty. Feeling imprisoned by his success (he wore sunglasses for two years as he was unable to look anyone in the eye), he vowed that his career would take a much more low-key direction in the future. With *Faith*, he had achieved everything he set out to do and more… and learned some valuable life lessons along the way.

"I think I'm already regarded as one of the main pop writers for the Eighties," he told *Rolling Stone* in 1988, when asked about his hopes for the future. "But I want to be regarded as that through the Nineties and do something to carry on, something that's really memorable, so the music becomes something historical. I think my music deserves it."

With subsequent albums *Listen Without Prejudice* and *Older*, he achieved his goal, but the gloriously catchy melodies and beautifully crafted ballads of *Faith* are the foundation on which his musical legacy is built.

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REELING FROM THE PRESSURES OF BECOMING A GLOBAL POP ICON, GEORGE MICHAEL BEGAN THE NINETIES IN DEFIANT MOOD AHEAD OF A ROLLERCOASTER DECADE THAT CONTAINED PROFESSIONAL HIGHS TOGETHER WITH PERSONAL LOWS…

STEVE HARNELL

As the Nineties dawned, George Michael was arguably the most important solo star on the planet, thanks to huge sales of *Faith* as well as multiple Grammy, MTV and BRIT awards.

But far from revelling in the spoils of victory, George was recoiling from the pressures of being a worldwide celebrity. In the *A Different Story* TV documentary, he gave an insight into his post-*Faith* campaign mental landscape: "I was intelligent enough to know I should not be trying to catch up with Michael Jackson or Madonna, which was absolutely what I was [previously] intent on doing. I felt *that* tired and exhausted at being the centre of that much attention. I suppose the way my lack of mental balance showed itself was that I actually really began to hide away when I got home, and did almost nothing for a year but try to re-establish some idea of a real life."

Apart from suffering the wearing intensity of life in the goldfish bowl of mega pop celebrity, George felt he had been unfairly criticised for the R&B album and R&B male artist American Music Award categories he won in 1989 as part of the *Faith* campaign – gongs traditionally won by black artists. Although George had always openly exhibited his love of R&B and soul music throughout his career, the backlash against the success of his crossover appeal left him feeling isolated and under siege.

Faith's follow-up was therefore conceived in a less-than-positive state of mind by the songwriter. Dark clouds gathered, and the resultant introspective material was a clear indication of the inner turmoil that George was feeling.

Right: George Michael in 1996 in a portrait taken to promote his album *Older*, released on Virgin in the UK and DreamWorks in the US after a recording hiatus of over five years
© DreamWorks / Everett Collection

Elton John on stage with George; the pair resurrected their Live Aid duet of ***Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me*** with a No.1 single in 1991

© Steve Rappart/Photoshot/Getty Images

With The Beatles' *Abbey Road* and *Revolver* on constant rotation as inspirations, *Listen…*'s mature songcraft was there for all to see, although his US record company's description of it as "George Michael's *Nebraska*" seems ridiculous now; the polished work from Michael, although equally inward-looking and often downbeat, was far more intricate and varied than the stripped-back austerity of the Bruce Springsteen album of 1982. *Praying For Time,* George's breathtaking ballad that acted as lead single for the album, was released on 13 August 1990, three weeks ahead of *Listen Without Prejudice Vol.1*. A stark musing on social inequality, it was some distance removed from the crowdpleasing pop of *Faith*.

When the album finally arrived it won generally positive reviews, although some critics mourned the apparent loss of George's positivity and joie de vivre. The album topped the charts in the UK but stalled at No.2 in the States. Singles from the album unaccountably failed to set the world alight, with the resulting *Freedom! '90, Waiting For That Day*, *Heal The Pain, Cowboys And Angels* and *Soul Free* often merely making blink-and-you'll-miss-them entries in charts around the world.

Although the LP would go on to sell eight million copies, it was seen as a disappointment in the US where it shifted only two million – a figure dwarfed by the seven-time platinum magnitude of the seven-million copy success of *Faith*.

Influences: the Paul McCartney-style *Heal The Pain* single of 1991 plus 1990's *Waiting For That Day,* which gave a credit to Jagger and Richards

POP_UP George provided the epic seven-minute closer *Tonight* for the Elton John tribute album *Two Rooms* in 1991. Elton's original came from his 1976 LP, *Blue Moves*

CHANGING THE GAME

What followed was an ugly stand-off between George and his record company, Sony. Michael believed that the only way to preserve his own sanity throughout the new album campaign would be to bow out of promotional duties altogether (he subsequently claimed his label never fully supported his new album in the US and let it wither on the vine). Meanwhile, his record company felt George's no-show in the PR game left it impossible for them to gain any traction with the public. The finger-pointing would eventually lead to bitter legal action.

George outlined his feelings about publicity in the *Freedom* TV documentary: "I was still struggling with the idea of having that much attention. I think I recoiled from that and felt that stepping back would save me somehow from screwing up my career. I see hard-sell promotion as prostituting myself… I can't help it. Even if that's a complete fallacy, that's how I see it. I'm of that generation."

After George spoke to the *LA Times* about retreating from promotion, Frank Sinatra wrote him an open letter telling him to get over it: "Be glad that God gave you this gift and get out there and use it". "I don't think he wrote the letter!" George later revealed. "I actually believe it was the work of a publicist, not the work of a genius. Even though he's the greatest singer who ever walked the planet as far as I'm concerned, I wasn't taking any advice from Frank Sinatra!"

UNDER THE COVERS

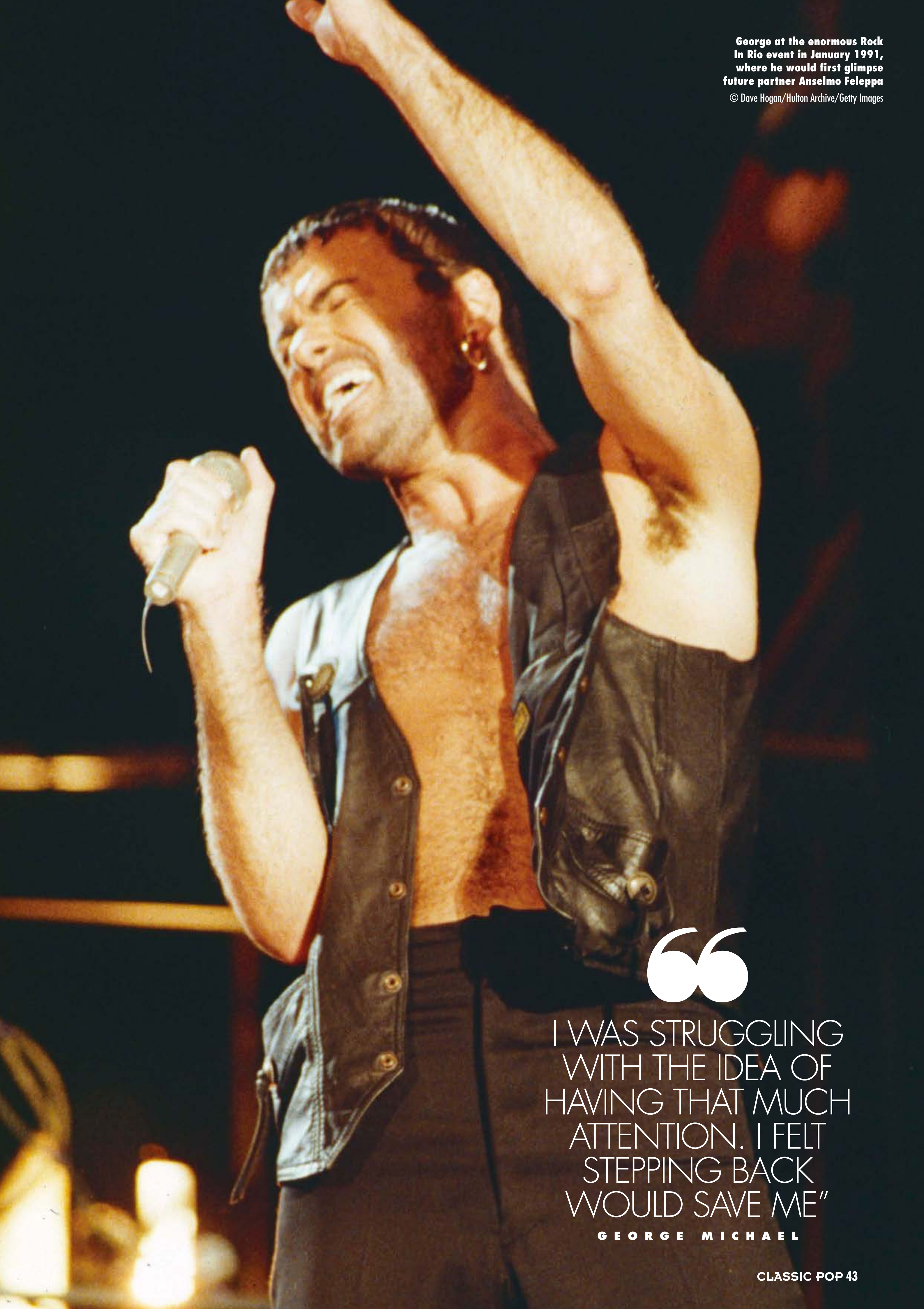
Further adding to the obfuscation surrounding the promotion of *Listen…*, rather than promoting the album with 'traditional' live shows highlighting new tracks interspersed with some of his greatest hits, George decided to stage the Cover To Cover tour, filling the setlist predominantly with versions of songs by some of his favourite artists, leaving his own material often in the background.

The Cover To Cover tour was George's second expedition as a solo artist and it spanned 30 shows over nine months from January to October 1991. Taking in the UK and US, Canada, Brazil and Japan, the shows paid tribute to the likes of David Bowie, Culture Club, Soul II Soul, Terence Trent D'Arby and Adamski, with only the tail-end of the setlists reverting to hits from Wham! plus cuts from *Faith* and *Listen Without Prejudice Vol.1*. His cover of Elton John's 1974 hit *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* made regular appearances; Michael first sang it with the star himself at Live Aid, and it would go on to become a much-needed hit when released as a one-off single.

On a personal level, the Cover To Cover tour would change George's life dramatically. An audience member at the Rock In Rio festival in Brazil – a temporary stop-off on the tour proper at the Maracana Stadium, which at 160,000 people would be the biggest show Michael had ever played – went on to have a huge impact on the singer over the coming years. That man was Anselmo Feleppa.

In the *Freedom* documentary, George explained: "At the front of these 160,000 people was this guy on the right-hand side of the stage [who] just fixed me with this look. He was so cute. I was so distracted by him that I stayed away from that area of the stage for a while because otherwise I thought I'd get really distracted and forget the words!

"The moment I looked at him, I got the feeling that told me I was going to get to know him very



George at the enormous Rock In Rio event in January 1991, where he would first glimpse future partner Anselmo Feleppa

© Dave Hogan/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

"I WAS STRUGGLING WITH THE IDEA OF HAVING THAT MUCH ATTENTION. I FELT STEPPING BACK WOULD SAVE ME"

GEORGE MICHAEL

HOLD ON TO MY FREEDOM

THE SONY COURT CASE

© Nick Skinner / Associated Newspapers/REX/Shutterstock

'Panayiotou v Sony Music Entertainment' – the official name of the court case that George, under his real name of Georgios Panayiotou, instigated against his record company – would prove to be a pivotal moment in the songwriter's career and for the music industry in general… but not for the reasons he had hoped for.

Claiming he was operating under a regime of "professional slavery" and that Sony failed to properly promote *Listen…* in the US, leading to underwhelming sales, George argued that the recording contract he'd signed as a young man was grossly unfair and tied him to a life of servitude. The singer wanted the High Court to declare his contract with Sony null and void, claiming its length of 12-15 years was unreasonably long. His view was that any individual has the right to walk away from their employer if they so wish, but the record industry took away that right.

In the *Freedom* documentary, he ruefully added: "I can't think of one artist that supported me. I know of a lot of artists that sat back and waited for the result, but that's a different thing."

However, after a lengthy court case before the High Court of Justice's Chancery Division in London, Mr Justice Jonathan Parker ruled that the contract was in fact both reasonable and fair. Michael lost the court case "on every count". "I regret it to this day," he later added.

In a statement after the judge's conclusion, George told the assembled press: "Having received this judgement, I would like to reiterate the reasons why I embarked upon these proceedings. I have no right to resign. In fact, there is no such thing as resignation for an artist in the music industry. Effectively, you sign a piece of paper at the beginning of your career and you're expected to live with that decision, good or bad, for the rest of your professional life. The initial view is that we have very strong grounds for appeal."

His stated intention to take an appeal to the House of Lords was only a bluff, according to manager and friend David Austin; George may have intended taking it to the Court of Appeal in the UK, but the House of Lords or the European Court of Justice was never an option.

In the *A Different Story* documentary, George added: "The court case was a perfectly good place to put my anger [after Anselmo's death]. I used to run on the treadmill every day and play squash and do everything I could to get rid of all this anger and fear, but the best place for it was Court No.1, really.

"I do remember being absolutely gutted, not that I had lost but [despite] the record companies being absolutely outside reasonable law, there was nothing that required them to pull their socks up in any way. There was an inevitability to the end of youth culture as we loved it, but if artists from the early Nineties [onwards] really had been masters of their own destiny, there is a possibility that *Pop Idol* wouldn't have ruined everything."

well and that he was going to be a part of my life. Anselmo was the first time I really loved someone selflessly. It was kind of immediate… everybody, with the exception of my family, was introduced to him very quickly because I felt that everything had changed. He was just very full of energy, very loving. I was happier than I'd ever been in my entire life."

SLAVE TO THE RHYTHM

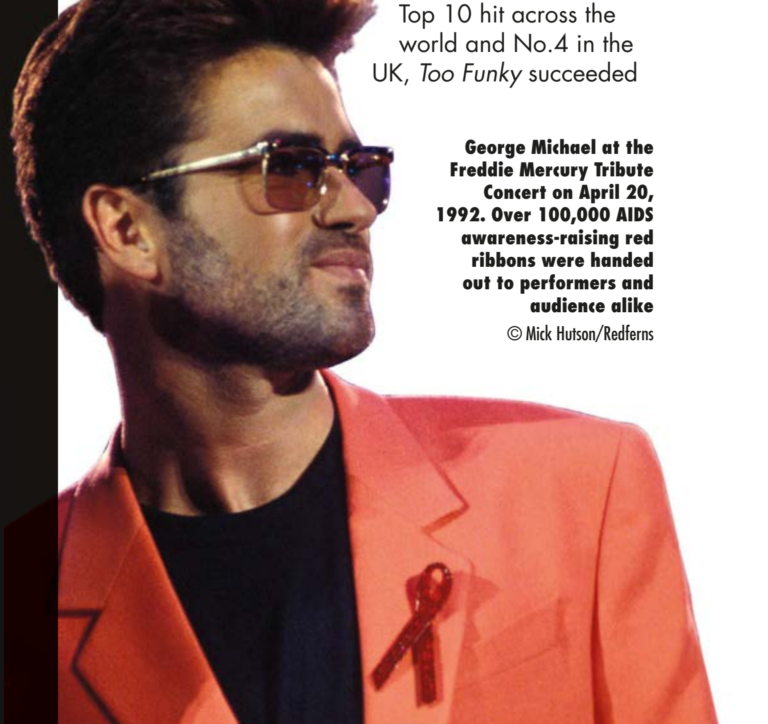
If *Listen…*'s success was less than expected in the US, the album proved to be on surer footing on home soil. Certified four-times platinum, it would go on to spend 88 weeks in the UK charts. A more immediate signpost of its success came at the 1991 BRIT Awards, which saw it win British Album of the Year. George was nominated for British Male Solo Artist, but lost out to his friend Elton John.

But George's ultimate dissatisfaction with the way that his record company Sony treated him in the US in particular led to an ugly parting of the ways. With the exception of Prince's own battles with his record company, this was to be the most high-profile legal case the music business had ever seen.

Not only did Michael claim that Sony under-promoted *Listen…* as a direct response to his decision not to appear on the album's cover or in promotional videos, but the singer also alleged his recording contract prevented him from managing his own image or resigning and seeking a new label deal. With a phrase later seized upon by Prince, George described his deal as "professional slavery".

Under the terms of Michael's 1990 Sony contract, he was given a £1 million advance in February 1992 to provide a follow-up to *Listen Without Prejudice Vol.1*. This advance was returned in August of that year, with George filing a lawsuit in October. The decision to take his record bosses to the courts would be one of the most regrettable of his career.

With George knowing that the intended upbeat follow-up to *Listen…* would be permanently shelved, he made the decision to donate three of its songs – *Too Funky, Do You Really Want To Know* and *Happy* – to the *Red Hot + Dance* charity compilation to raise money for the battle against HIV and AIDS. The album was released on 7 July 1992, with its lead single *Too Funky* hitting the record store shelves a week later. A Top 10 hit across the world and No.4 in the UK, *Too Funky* succeeded



George Michael at the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert on April 20, 1992. Over 100,000 AIDS awareness-raising red ribbons were handed out to performers and audience alike

© Mick Hutson/Redferns

George and Linda Evangelista share a moment during the *Too Funky* video shoot in Paris, 1992

© Kevin Mazur/Getty Images

Three exclusive songs from the aborted *Listen...* follow-up opened *Red Hot + Dance*, with more tracks from Madonna, Seal, PM Dawn and others

in keeping George in the public eye, but on his own terms – a neat move which would have no doubt infuriated his paymasters.

CRUEL WORLD

Unfortunately, George's happiness with Anselmo was short-lived. Within a month or two of meeting George he found himself suffering a flu that he couldn't get rid of, and worrying red marks appeared on his chest. The pair were in Los Angeles when Anselmo was advised to be checked out for the HIV virus. While he took the test in Brazil, George went home to his family at Christmas. "I was sat at the Christmas table not knowing whether my partner – who the people around the table did not know about – this man who I was in love with, was terminally ill."

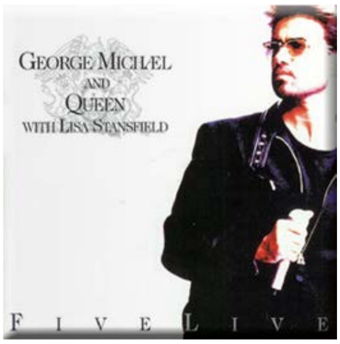
Anselmo's test, unfortunately, proved positive; George was devastated at the news that his lover was condemned by a terminal illness in his mid-30s. Shortly afterwards, the singer was contacted by his publicist to inform him that Freddie Mercury had died of AIDS-related pneumonia. "I was really sad that Freddie had passed away but I was crying for something else entirely – that my partner and possibly myself were both HIV positive," George added.

Five months after Mercury's premature death, a major charity concert was to be staged in his memory featuring some of the music world's biggest stars. In front of a live crowd of 72,000 and a global audience estimated at one billion, the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert For AIDS Awareness would become one of the most significant concerts since Live Aid. After a first half which saw sets from acts including Metallica, Def Leppard and Guns N' Roses, the closing portion would see stars of the calibre of David Bowie, Elton John, Robert Plant and Roger Daltrey performing with the remaining members of Queen. Following Bowie's unexpected rendition of *The Lord's Prayer*, George blew everyone off the stage with a rousing three-song set, including *39*

The Freddie Mercury Tribute: "There's a certain note in his voice in *Somebody To Love* that was pure Freddie," said Brian May

© Kevin Mazur/WireImage

from Queen's *A Night At The Opera* album, and a duet with Lisa Stansfield on *These Are The Days Of Our Lives*. But it was a barnstorming rendition of *Somebody To Love* that will go down in history as one of the most iconic stage moments of his career.

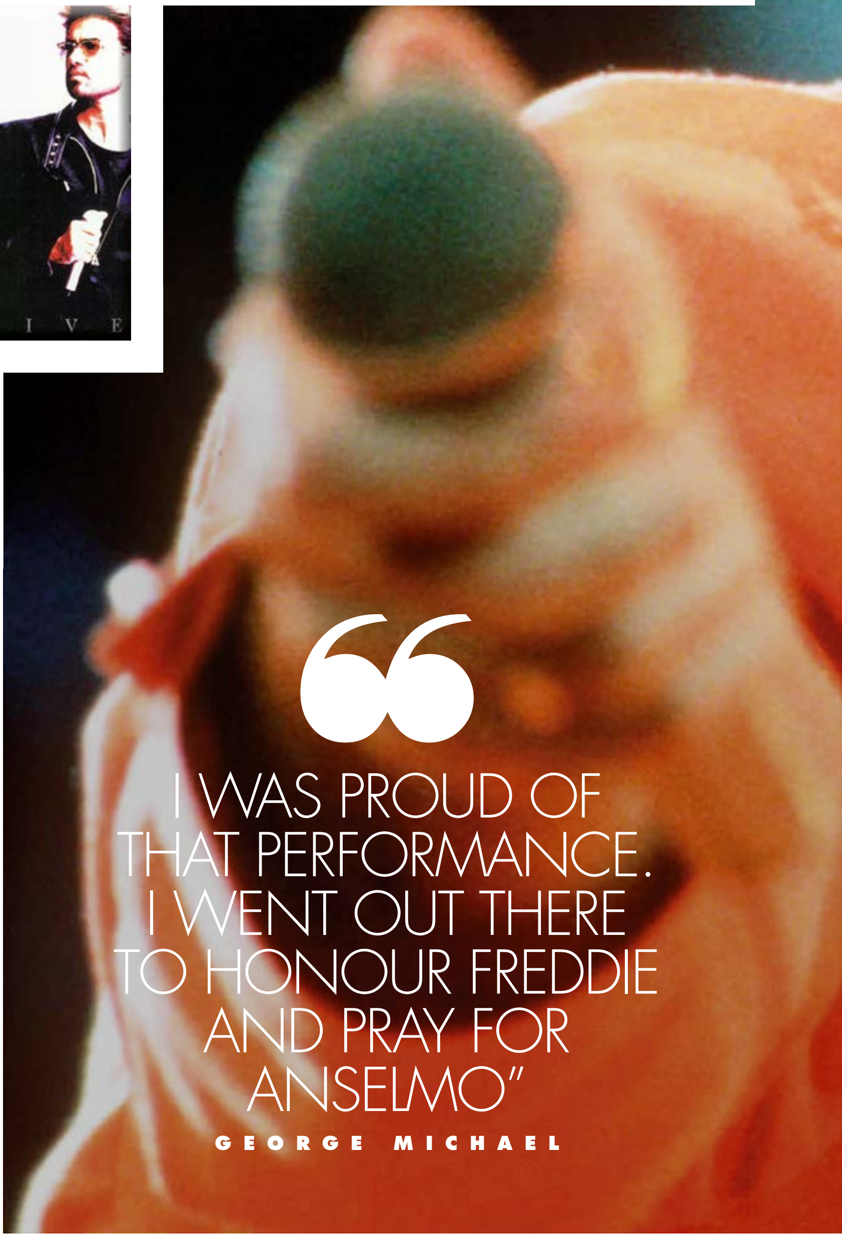


Overwhelmed by the sadness of singing the songs of a man he'd worshipped as a child, George poured his heart and soul into his appearance. In *A Different Story* he recalled: "I'm very proud of that performance. I went out there to honour Freddie and pray for Anselmo. I just wanted to die inside. So it was so much to me, all in that one performance."

Following Anselmo's tragic death in March 1993, George released the *Five Live* EP a month later with all proceeds going to the Mercury Phoenix Trust, a charity organisation set up by the remaining members of Queen to fight HIV and AIDS worldwide. All recorded live, three of the songs – *Killer, Papa Was A Rollin' Stone* and *Calling You* – were taken from George's Cover To Cover tour, while two others, *Somebody To Love* and the Lisa Stansfield duet *These Are The Days Of Our Lives,* were culled from the Freddie Mercury tribute concert. On some iterations of the release Queen also provide a sixth track, the 1974 studio recording of *Dear Friends*. The EP was a huge success, topping the singles chart after its release in April 1993.

HEAVEN SENT

Although George's releases in 1992 and the following year raised considerable sums for charity, they masked the fact that in the wake of his loss in the courts against Sony and the death of Anselmo, he was struggling to tap into his songwriting muse. In the end, six years passed before the follow-up



"I WAS PROUD OF THAT PERFORMANCE. I WENT OUT THERE TO HONOUR FREDDIE AND PRAY FOR ANSELMO"

GEORGE MICHAEL

© Michael Putland/Getty Images

George inviting the audience to join in during his showstopping spot at the Freddie Mercury Concert for AIDS Awareness

The video for the 1996 single *Fastlove* culminated in a rain-drenched dance sequence
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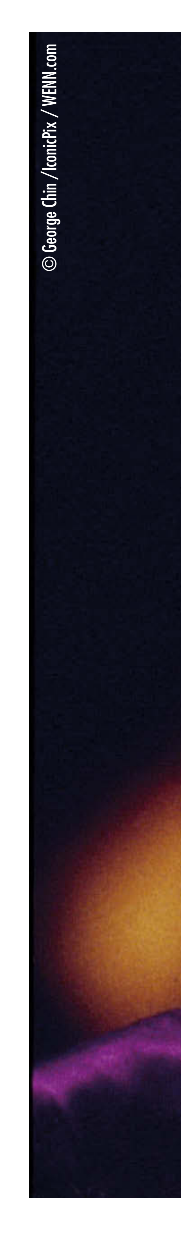

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"I KNEW MY AUDIENCE WOULD NOT DESERT ME IF THEY FOUND OUT I WAS GAY. I BELIEVE IN PEOPLE MORE THAN THAT"

GEORGE MICHAEL

George opened the MTV Europe Awards in Berlin in 1994 with a rousing *Freedom! '90* and closed the show with a stunning debut of the timeless *Jesus To A Child*

to *Listen...* saw the light of day. And it would be four years before George finally unveiled any new self-penned material at all, the heart-wrenching tribute to Anselmo, *Jesus To A Child*. The song was premiered in November 1994 at the inaugural MTV Europe Music Awards with a live performance in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. But it would be another two years before the track appeared on a finished studio album.

Appetite for new material from George was intense – *Jesus To A Child* entered the UK singles chart at No.1 in its opening week, a first for the singer. On the Billboard Hot 100 in the US it premiered at No.7, the highest new entry by a British artist for more than a quarter of a century.

The creation of *Jesus To A Child* proved to be a pivotal moment in George's re-emergence as a songwriter; he explained from then on it was "all systems go" as what became *Older* began to take shape over the next two years of writing and recording. After Michael's death in 2016, Dame Esther Rantzen, founder of the ChildLine charity, revealed that he had secretly donated all of *Jesus To A Child*'s £50,000 royalties to them. She said: "George helped us to reach out to hundreds of thousands of children through his generosity. I met him a couple of times – he approached us, rather than us going cap in hand to him, but it was an intensely personal gift. He didn't want it to be known or to be part of his image." She told BBC News that "he really wanted to keep his help secret, it was an intensely personal gift. It meant we could answer more children."

As George dealt with the grief of losing Anselmo, he began a relationship with art dealer Kenny Goss that was to last 15 years. But within a week of meeting Kenny, he heard that his mother had health concerns, with skin cancer of the most virulent form. It went into remission for three or four months but came back with a vengeance, and a week later she was dead. The singer later explained that he suffered depression that far exceeded usual grief, a depression that would trigger his battles with addictions throughout the remainder of his life.

Older was released on 14 May 1996 to huge acclaim and enormous sales in the UK. Although, like *Listen...* it was greeted with a rather more lukewarm reception in the States, *Older* was a massive success on home soil and in Europe. In the UK, it premiered at No.1 selling more the 280,000 copies in its

Jesus To A Child and *Fastlove* were successive UK No.1's in 1996 – George's best chart one-two since 1986

An unrepentant George leaving his Beverly Hills home for the first time since his arrest, 1998

© John Chapple/Getty Images

© MARK J. TERRILL/AP/REX/Shutterstock

> “SITTING DOWN AND SAYING ‘I AM GAY’ TO *THE DAILY MAIL* WOULD HAVE BEEN HARDER THAN ALL THE FLAK I TOOK”
>
> GEORGE MICHAEL

George and Stevie Wonder perform Stevie's classic ***Living For the City*** at the 4th Annual VH1 Honors Show in Universal City, California in 1997

first week – one of biggest debuts in British music history. With more than 1.8 million copies sold in the UK alone, it spent an astonishing 147 weeks in the Top 200, 99 of those in the Top 75. The six hit singles culled from the album over the next two years is a record that remains unsurpassed.

With George more than happy to be part of the promotional machine for the album and his new record companies, Virgin and US-based DreamWorks Records (it was the first release of the latter), he played a live show that was filmed for the *MTV Unplugged* series. It was recorded at Three Mills Studio in London on 11 October 1996, and his mother was in the audience. Tragically, it was to be the last time she would see George play live.

HUMAN NATURE

On the face of it, George was on top of the world, a second act in a career populated by numerous bumps in the road – but his private life was still dogged with depression and troubled episodes. His open relationship with Kenny Goss meant that George was still free to play the field, something that soon led him into trouble. On 7 April 1998, George was arrested for "engaging in a lewd act" in a public toilet at the Will Rogers Memorial Park in Beverley Hills. The singer had been the victim of a sting operation by local police. Michael explained in the *A Different Corner* documentary: "There were two guys that were, I think, part of that entrapment set-up going in and out of the bathroom and something in me said 'you shouldn't go in there. There's something really dodgy going on.' But I went."

After pleading no contest to the charge, Michael was fined $810 and sentenced to 80 hours of community service. For many artists, this news would have broken them and ruined their career, but George took it in his stride and dealt with the fall-out in remarkably candid fashion, opening up about his sexuality and offering no excuses for his behaviour. "Would there ever have been a day when I sat down and talked with someone from the *Daily Mail* or *Mail On Sunday* and said 'Yes, I am gay'. Would I have been able to do that? That probably would have been harder than all the flak I took!" he explained.

He totally diffused the situation with a superbly honest interview with Michael Parkinson in 1998. "To some degree, I was not in the best state of mind and it was a reckless thing to do," he told the chatshow legend. The wide-ranging interview touched on George's battles with depression, his realisation that he was gay rather than bisexual, and the faith he had in his audience that they would stand by him come what may. "I've always felt I have a very strong

POP_UP A lifelong Stevie Wonder fan, George took his cover of *As* – a duet with soul superstar Mary J Blige – to No.4 in the UK singles charts in 1999

George as a Raybanned LAPD officer in the PR triumph that was the *Outside* video

sense of my audience and I knew that they would not desert me if they found out I was gay. I believe in people more than that. If they get something rewarding from you emotionally such as music then they are tolerant of certain things – as well they should be."

Further hammering home the remarkable PR turnaround of the incident, George went on the front foot with the *Outside* single, a double-entendre-packed paean to sex in the open air that featured a controversial video satirising his arrest. The song made No.2 in the UK singles chart and was a Top 20 entry in multiple countries around the world.

George's final release of the Nineties came just a fortnight before the end of the decade. *Songs From The Last Century* featured 10 covers including tracks by The Police and U2 side project Passengers alongside standards from the worlds of jazz, musicals and film. George explained: "I honestly wanted to stay afloat personally by having something to do which meant learning, progress, working with [producer] Phil Ramone, singing songs that would stretch my voice."

Once again, sales were strongest at home in the UK, but the album only reached a disappointing No.157 in the US, marking time during another lengthy hiatus in recording. It would be another four years before Michael was to return with the knowingly-titled *Patience*. ■

Below: George forbade the BBC from showing his 30-minute set at the Netaid Concert For Third World Debt at Wembley in 1999 because of a microphone breakdown

© Brian Rasic/Getty Images

THE KEY RECORDINGS

TONGUE-IN-CHEEK WIT AND A GRANDSTANDING DUET: JUST TWO OF GEORGE'S BEST MOMENTS IN THE NINETIES

FREEDOM! '90

1990

Maybe this should have been the lead single from *Listen Without Prejudice Vol.1*, rather than the more sombre *Praying For Time.* Packed with lyrical zingers about George's life in Wham! (*"What a kick, just a buddy and me"*) and newfound cynicism about the record business, this upbeat classic displays his ear for melody plus a more mature songwriting outlook. The David Fincher-directed video featuring Naomi Campbell, Linda Evangelista, Tatjana Patitz, Christy Turlington and Cindy Crawford would become one of the most iconic of the Nineties. Endlessly quotable, George's wit shines throughout when dealing with his pop star reinvention (*"When I knew which side my bread was buttered, I took the knife as well"*).

DON'T LET THE SUN GO DOWN ON ME

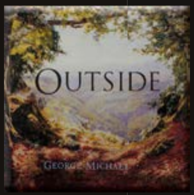
1991

With the *Listen Without Prejudice Vol.1* singles failing to set the world alight, George needed a hit – and he scored a No.1 in the UK and US, among other places, with this duet with Elton John. Originally recorded by Elton in 1974 for his *Caribou* album, the pair first revived it for Live Aid in 1985, and George regularly sang it on his Cover To Cover tour in 1991. The promo video was shot over several days, with the footage captured at George's rehearsal space, an aircraft hangar in Burbank, California. As with the *Too Funky* single, proceeds from this Grammy-nominated release went to charity, this time being spread across 10 different worthy causes.

TOO FUNKY

1992

When *Listen... Vol.2* was scrapped in the wake of the legal battle with Sony, George donated this cracking floor-filler to the *Red Hot + Dance* project to raise cash for AIDS awareness. The most-played song in Europe in 1992, the single went on to sell almost 170,000 copies in the UK alone. Michael nabbed a bit from Jocelyn Brown's 1984 R&B banger *Somebody Else's Guy* as well as Anne Bancroft dialogue from *The Graduate* – and closing words courtesy of actress Annie Leake from *The Radio Ham*, a classic episode of *Hancock*, featuring hangdog comedian Tony Hancock. The high-fashion-satirising promo boasts costumes by Thierry Mugler, plus Tyra Banks and a returning Linda Evangelista.



OUTSIDE

1998

If George's arrest at the Will Rogers Memorial Park in Beverly Hills was a personal low point, he dealt with the fallout in typically brave and witty fashion. *Outside* pokes fun at the incident brilliantly with a strings-laden disco reboot packed with double-entendres. Thumbing his nose at his critics (*"I'd service the community, but I already have, you see"*), the song came with an outrageous video which deliberately pushed the buttons of the naysayers, with George turning up in uniform at a loo-turned-club. The punchline of two male officers passionately kissing caused much controversy, and George was unsuccessfully sued for 'emotional distress' by one of the undercover cops who arrested him.

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CLASSIC ALBUM

LISTEN WITHOUT PREJUDICE VOL.1

REINVENTING THE IDEA OF 'DIFFICULT SECOND ALBUM SYNDROME', GEORGE'S FOLLOW-UP TO *FAITH* BROUGHT UNEASY LISTENING TO THE MASSES

STEVE HARNELL

The signs were there, of course, right from the Wham! days. After all, what was *Careless Whisper* if it wasn't a plea to be taken seriously away from the bachelor-centric fun of the band mothership?

Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1 – a provocative title that also hinted of further material already in the works – was a concerted attempt by George Michael to free himself of the shackles of pop superstardom. Introspective, at times mournful, mature, this was a powerful and ambitious collection from a serious-minded singer-songwriter at the peak of his powers.

Michael felt under siege – a prisoner of his fame as one of the most recognisable pop icons on the planet, and lambasted as a black music interloper. His two wins at the American Music Awards were controversial and unpopular in some sections of the black music community. If George felt that his hit-making powers had often brought him nothing but unhappiness and mental anguish, then *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1* would see him set out an agenda for his own future, defiantly on his own terms. This was a kind of musical digging-in of heels that had rarely, if ever, been pulled off before by an artist of his stature.

TRACKLISTING

SIDE A

Praying For Time
Freedom! '90
They Won't Go When I Go
Something To Save
Cowboys And Angels

SIDE B

Waiting For That Day
Mother's Pride
Heal The Pain
Soul Free
Waiting (Reprise)

Recorded at Sarm West and Metropolis Studios in London, the record – like *Faith* – would be entirely self-produced by the songwriter.

In the *Freedom* documentary, George explains: "Suddenly, I couldn't get anywhere near black radio and that was really the reason why the record was called *Listen Without Prejudice*. It was me saying 'here's an album that has bits of gospel, R&B, some very white stuff. It was just trying to say 'let me be [all] of these things without having to be one or the other.'"

George's ever-present soul inspirations can still be heard on the LP, but new influences are also added to the mix, in particular the songcraft of

THE PLAYERS

RELEASED
3 September 1990

LABEL
Epic

PRODUCED BY
George Michael

ENGINEER
Chris Porter

RECORDED AT
Sarm West and Metropolis Studios, London

PERSONNEL
George Michael – vocals, keyboards, bass guitar, acoustic guitar, drums, percussion, backing vocals, horn arrangements; Danny Cummings – drums, percussion; Ian Thomas – drums, percussion; Tony Patler – keyboards; Deon Estus – bass guitar, backing vocals; Phil Palmer – acoustic guitar, electric guitar; Chris Cameron – keyboards, piano, horn and string arrangements; Emily Burridge – cello; Alfia Nakipbekova – cello; Andy Hamilton – saxophone; Pete Gleadall – sequencer, programming

Lennon and McCartney. For the duration of the writing and recording sessions, The Beatles' progressive *Revolver* and the sophisticated studio perfectionism of *Abbey Road* were constant touchstones.

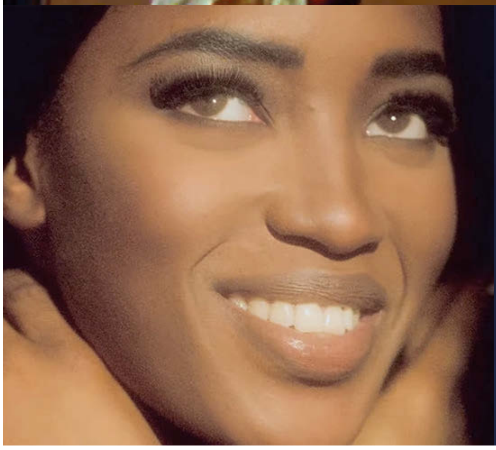
If fans of Michael had any doubts that he was stretching out into a more adult direction then they vanished with the startlingly mature initial offering from the album, *Praying For Time*, his first release in almost two years and the opening gambit of the masterwork to follow. Universally admired, it was a remarkably incisive plea for social equality. James Hunter of *Rolling Stone* magazine described the song as "a distraught look at the world's astounding woundedness. Michael offers the healing passage of time as the only balm for physical and emotional hunger, poverty, hypocrisy and hatred."

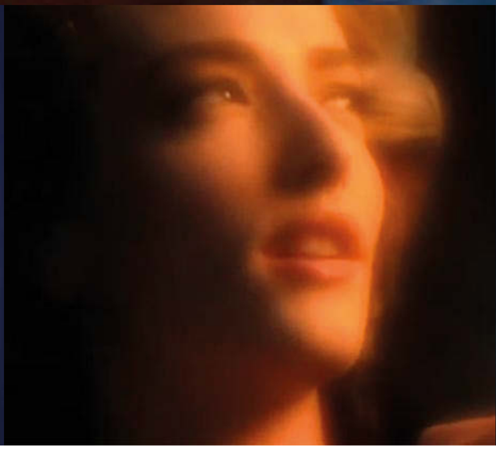
Praying For Time was George's determined effort to write something with the

Channelling The Beatles, soul and funk to forge a new, mature sound: George Michael in 1990

© Mick Hutson/Redferns

Famous faces, burning symbols… but no George. "I'm going to kind of disappear," he told *Q* at the time of *Freedom! '90*





anthemic and philosophical qualities of John Lennon's *Imagine*; he pulled it off with aplomb, far exceeding the overly simplistic spirituality of the former Beatle's most famous solo single.

If George's record company thought his new direction would be a difficult sell, the conflict between artist and label was further compounded by news that the singer would not appear in any of the videos for his new singles. In the record company's eyes, this was prima donna stubbornness taken to a whole new level. For George, it was the only way he could preserve his own sanity after the mentally exhausting promotional merry-go-round that had surrounded the whole *Faith* campaign.

> "If you're going to say 'I'm not going to appear in the video', I'd say it's a fairly good consolation prize. The burning jacket, the exploding guitar… it was me saying 'I'm sick of all this, I really can't cope with it'" **GEORGE MICHAEL**

Carefully sequenced, the jolting opener is followed by *Freedom! '90*, equally primed to prove a point. With an almost Italo house piano lead line, *Freedom! '90* was packed with some of George's smartest lyrics as he moved away from his former life as a pop pin-up. In just one verse he sums up his Wham!, *Faith* and new eras: *"We won the race, got out of the place/ Went back home, got a brand new face for the boys on MTV/ But today the way I play the game has got to change, oh yeah/ Now I'm gonna get myself happy."*

Its video – even without George – still managed to become iconic. Helmed by *Fight Club* director David Fincher, it featured the world's five most famous supermodels of the era – Naomi Campbell, Cindy Crawford, Linda Evangelista, Christy Turlington and Tatjana Patitz.

George was unrepentant about choosing to remain absent from the screen, later explaining: "If you're going to say to your record company 'Look, I'm not going

KEY TRACKS

PRAYING FOR TIME
The stately album opener and lead single is a huge statement of intent from Michael. A deliberate attempt to write a generational anthem to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with John Lennon's *Imagine*, this is one of George's finest compositions. An incisive analysis of our relationship with the idea of charity and social injustice, *Praying For Time* announced his full-scale reinvention as a mature songwriter who wanted to ditch his pop star past.

WAITING FOR THAT DAY
Based on the ubiquitous *Funky Drummer* sample of the early Nineties, this introspective break-up ballad also incorporates elements of The Rolling Stones' *You Can't Always Get What You Want.* With just drums and a strummed acoustic guitar for backing, the stripped-back mid-tempo track puts the emphasis on George's pained soulful vocals. They didn't appreciate it in the States – it was the first of George's singles to miss the Top 10.

FREEDOM! '90
A rare upbeat moment on the album as an instantly memorable piano hook kicks off some of George's wittiest couplets. As with *Waiting For That Day*, it's driven by a sample of James Brown's *Funky Drummer*. It's a mission statement for new-era George – wilier, knowing, wry and prepared not to take any nonsense from his record company paymasters. A superb reworked version that included snatches of Soul II Soul's *Back To Life (However Do You Want Me)* featured on the B-side.

HEAL THE PAIN
After the Lennon homage of *Praying For Time* comes this nod to the melodic heart-on-the-sleeve balladry of McCartney. The acoustic-led number makes for a pleasing counterpoint to the stark *Mother's Pride* in the album's closing stages. George eventually went on to re-record *Heal The Pain* with McCartney in 2005 for his *Twenty Five* compilation of the following year; it's also included on the 2017 expanded version of *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1.*

to appear in this video', then I would say that's a fairly good consolation prize. The burning jacket, the exploding guitar, the exploding jukebox… it was me just saying 'I'm sick of all this, I really can't cope with it.'"

George's rapid maturation into one of the most impressive white soul vocalists of his generation is best seen in the virtuoso cover of Stevie Wonder's mournful gospel ballad *They Won't Go When I Go*, which even manages to surpass the original. Speaking in the *Freedom* documentary, Wonder was effusive in his praise for it, adding: "At the end of the day, we come alone in this world and we will die alone. It's what we do in between that's going to determine how and what we'll be remembered as, and what we can think about in spirit. It was great to hear [George] sing this song."

Something To Save, an acoustic string-laden ballad was equally affecting; a plea for a relationship in trouble. At seven minutes plus, the jazzy shuffle of *Cowboys And Angels* proved that George was unafraid to stretch out in the studio and throw the radio-pleasing conventions of the three-minute pop song in the trash. But *Listen…* isn't without its awareness of chart trends. *Waiting For That Day* jumped on the *Funky Drummer* sample bandwagon even if it turned the ebullience of the original rhythm into something more downbeat. Equally, *Mother's Pride* was downcast and maudlin.
The track gained significant airplay in the US during the first Gulf War in 1991, with radio stations mixing tributes from callers to their fallen relatives with Michael's song of families torn apart by military conflict and damned to repeat the process, generation after generation.

If *Listen..* can seem like the sound of a tortured artist struggling to find hope in a hopeless universe, then the balm of the Paul McCartney homage *Heal The Pain* takes some of the weight off the album's heavy shoulders. The reggae-tinged *Soul Free* lets in some sunshine at the tail end of the record, too, only for the tender acoustic ballad *Waiting (Reprise)* to anchor us to harsh reality once again.

A landmark record in Michael's back catalogue, after the populist staging post of *Faith*, his transition to fully-fledged grown-up solo artist was now complete. ■

POP ART

YOUNG GUNS GEORGE MICHAEL AND ANDREW RIDGELEY ARRIVED IN THE UK CHARTS IN 1982 WITH A FRESH SOUND AND IMAGE THAT STOOD APART YET BORROWED FROM MANY GENRES. IT DIDN'T QUITE FIT, IT WAS UNAPOLOGETICALLY POP… BUT THERE WAS AN INTELLIGENCE AND INTENT BEHIND THE SONGS – AND THE WAY THEY WERE PACKAGED

ANDREW DINELEY

Attention to detail was part of what made George Michael the consummate star he was. When Wham! first appeared, the charts were an eclectic realm of 'anything goes'. There was still a whiff of post-punk new wave in the air, disco was clinging on for its life, and groundbreaking electronic based acts were stepping out of the shadows, posturing their way onto bedroom walls across the land. Record labels heavily relied on the transformative powers of designers, and many of them forged new careers specifically in service to the music industry – a perfect pop symbiosis.

One design studio that appeared the same year as Wham! was XL, a small London operation with big ambitions. Tom Watkins, XL's founder, would eventually go on to establish his creative team as house design studio for ZTT Records, the label behind Frankie Goes To Hollywood et al, but their first sleeve design was for Wham!

In his memoir *Let's Make Lots Of Money*, Watkins details his time working with the band. "We designed the original sleeve for their breakthrough *Wham! Rap* single. It was a line drawing of George and Andrew in profile that I traced from the contact sheet of a photo session. Then we layered 'exotic' typography on the sleeve that looked like it had been lifted straight from a Chinese takeaway menu." There is a naïveté to this early two-colour sleeve design, but it's important to remember that whilst sound may have evolved in the Eighties, the design industry was essentially still reliant on tools of the past.

The album that followed, entitled *Fantastic*, embraced photography, and fans were treated to a smouldering portrait of the duo taken by Chris Craymer. The image was considered so fit for purpose that another shot from the same session was used for the sleeve of the single *Bad Boys*, albeit in black and white. A full-colour third image from the session was reserved for the rare vinyl picture disc.

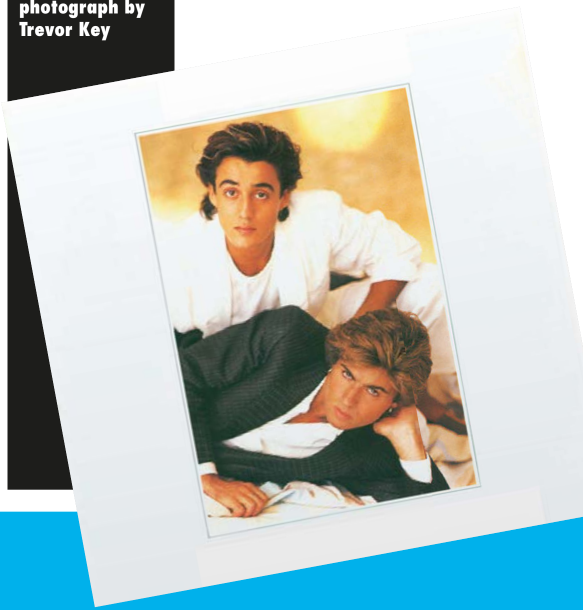
Rob O'Connor's Stylorouge design studio was already well established by the time *Bad Boys* was released in 1983, and this would prove to be the first of many his studio would work on with George Michael over the years. The cover image is a great example of necessity being the mother of

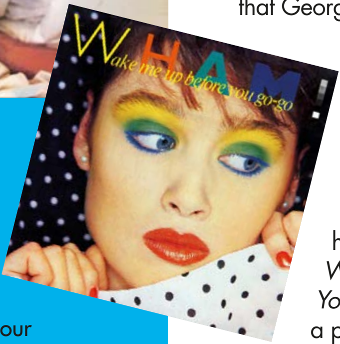
The 'back to back' *Fantastic* photo, the *Bad Boys* picture disc and the regular *Bad Boys* single sleeve all came from a Chris Craymer shoot after one look was rejected – and another lost in a taxi

Strange beginnings: the design for Wham!'s first single, featuring a none-too-flattering line drawing and "Chinese takeaway menu" lettering

"I met George to hear the playback of *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go*. This 20-year-old tells me he's written, arranged and produced it. I thought, this guy is fantastic. It may be populist, but it's brilliant. I can't be snobbish and avant-garde in front of that" **PETER SAVILLE**

Below: the original and rather classy *Make It Big* album cover with no front typography, the inferior spelling-it-out US version, and the 'eyeshadow girl' design for *Wake Me Up…* by Peter Saville, based on a photograph by Trevor Key





invention, as a series of unfortunate events led to its final design – which O'Connor can now look back on with a smile.

"It's such a simple cover but it took a long time," he recalls. "In fact, we did it three times. The first shoot was of George and Andrew escaping down an alleyway, looking like bad boys. It was a bit like that opening scene in *Trainspotting*, actually. We used images, but George and Andrew didn't like them – so we did a reshoot with Eric Watson of them dressed as leather boys.

"It looked good, but Eric left the whole photoshoot in a taxi when he was bringing them over to me. All we had left were the clip tests – and as much as we tried, it never really worked. So in the end we used a shot from a third session with Chris Craymer… and that was what became that iconic image of them leaning back to back."

With a new recording contract, Wham!'s 1984 sophomore album entitled *Make It Big* couldn't have been more aptly titled. Now a household name with an international audience and a fuller sound, the sleeve design brought a new level of sophistication – in the UK, at least.

Peter Saville's design studio PSA accepted creative duties, despite being better known for design work with artists from Factory Records and bands possibly considered more experimental. For Wham!, Saville's studio dispensed with excess design, presenting the duo via a Tony McGee portrait shot.

This time all the typography was reserved for the back sleeve, rendered neo-classically with an elegantly centred, upper case, serif typeface in black on white. Inexplicably, the sleeve was redesigned for the US market using an image from the same photo session, but the white space was removed and a bold yet bland typeface in cyan and magenta now sadly dates the design in ways not applicable to the UK original.

For some, it may have seemed odd that Peter Saville would choose to work with such a commercial outfit as Wham! but he rightly had no qualms, recognising George Michael as a credible artist long before it was fashionable to do so. In his book *Designed By Peter Saville*, the designer elaborates on his admiration for the man. "George Michael made the music that George Michael loved," he points out. "He just happened to be archetypal of millions. I went to meet him at Basing Street Studio off Portobello, and I can hear the playback of *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go*, which as a pop song is massive. This 20-year-old, who I thought was a performer, tells me that he's written, arranged and produced it. I thought 'This guy is fantastic'. It may be populist, but it's brilliant. And I can't be snobbish and avant-garde in front of that."

Peter Saville's relationship with Wham! lasted for several singles and would eventually extend into George Michael's solo career. For *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go*, Saville proved that even he wasn't immune to channelling the zeitgeist, with a sleeve design that now looks very much a product of its time. Interestingly, he – with the assistance of acclaimed photographer Trevor Key – devised a sleeve that didn't depict Wham! themselves, an

NOT SO FANTASTIC

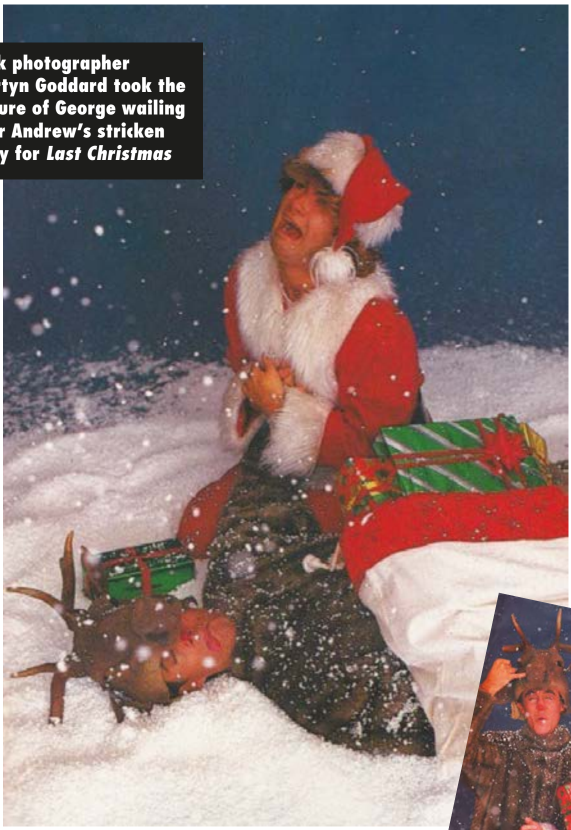
INNERVISION SQUEEZE THE PIPS

At the end of 1983, what remains a troubled curio in the Wham! catalogue appeared with a sleeve that's a great example of formulaic Eighties-style graphic design by Shoot That Tiger! Visually, its design also provided clues that the *Club Fantastic Megamix* wasn't an authentic release. It was an effort by Innervision, Wham!'s record label at the time, to cash in on the duo's popularity, just in time for Christmas. The mix segued three tracks from the *Fantastic* album: *A Ray Of Sunshine*, *Come On* and their cover version of The Miracles' *Love Machine* from 1975. The single arrived three months after Wham! had become embroiled in legal proceedings with their label, leading to George and Andrew publicly denouncing the release. In *Smash Hits* magazine at the time, George didn't hold back: "We don't approve of it and we don't feel that we can recommend that anybody should buy it. We could be very unhappy to think that any of our fans might waste their money on it… I just hope the radio don't play it. It would be so irritating to hear something you think is so bad." Whether the radio played it or not, the single still managed to make it to No.15 in the charts.

unusual move for a single that was the epitome of pop from a band that were now the very definition of pin-up poster boys. For the follow-up singles *Everything She Wants* and *Last Christmas*, more refined design stylings were revisited with full bleed photography and classic Saville back cover typography.

These two singles illustrated two very different sides of Wham! *Everything She Wants*, with its Martin Goddard portrait, showed the duo as plaintive, serious artists; in contrast, *Last Christmas* cast them as jokers. The limited edition gatefold single took the joke even further and included another photograph from the same session, with Ridgeley the red-nosed reindeer cruelly slaughtered and lying supine in the snow with his festive comrade George, dressed as Father Christmas, wailing at his side – a reference to the press speculation that Wham!'s days were numbered. The supporting text pushed the message home: "But all good things must come to an end, and countless 'WHAM! SPLIT' stories are realised as 'Rudolph' Ridgeley is struck down by a rabid *NME* husky".

Above: the classy and minimal *I'm Your Man* design, the wistful *Everything She Wants* portrait and the new, serious George on *Careless Whisper*



Rock photographer Martyn Goddard took the picture of George wailing over Andrew's stricken body for *Last Christmas*

Peter Saville Associates would continue to work with Wham! until the end with their final singles. *I'm Your Man* heralded a step toward design minimalism, with its flat metallic silver and spectral gradient edging. This reductive approach was even more in evidence with the design for *The Edge Of Heaven*, where everything was discarded bar the Wham! logo placed against a two-tone blue gradient.

Peter Saville's studio had designed the cover of George Michael's debut solo single *Careless Whisper* in 1984, so it made sense that he stay on board for the first single following the announcement of the Wham! split in 1986. *A Different Corner* saw George Michael returning in a more contemplative mood, and this was reflected in the sombre design. The single was a minimal masterpiece, and its black and white Trevor Key photograph complemented it perfectly. The sleeve gave little away, allowing the song to speak for itself, with just one short line of text obliquely hinting at its origins – "This record is dedicated to a memory".

1986 also saw the release of George Michael's debut album *Faith*, and any residual accusations of George as a teeny-bop idol were quickly discarded by critics upon hearing his new direction. Meticulous attention to detail had been applied to every aspect of the project. George oversaw almost everything about *Faith*, way beyond song composition, and this naturally applied to the design of the album's sleeve. For this he collaborated once again with Stylorouge's Rob O'Connor, who remembers the process fondly.

"George was always really hands-on when I worked with him on the *Faith* album," O'Connor emphasises. "He would mark up the photographs to show what he wanted to be retouched. We also designed dozens of different icons for the sleeve, then he came in one day and said 'I've been working on this myself, and these are the five I like'. For him they represented faith, music, money, fame and love."

Wham! ended their career on a high with a series of sold-out concerts in China. "One of the many reasons the Chinese chose Wham! and not other groups who've asked was because of what we represent: optimism and aspiration;" George remarked. "Also, we're at the opposite end of the scale to what China sees as the decadent rock acts of the West. You know – sex, drugs, scandal... they want a group who, I suppose, have a clean reputation."

Any wholesome image aspirations were summarily abandoned with the release of one of the more controversial singles from the *Faith* album. The promotional video for *I Want Your Sex* showed George romping around on satin sheets with make-up artist Kathy Jeung, a scenario that would be replicated on the single's cover. Unusually, the single image came first and was the inspiration for the video. George had seen the picture, taken by James Wedge, and liked it so much that he contacted the photographer to purchase the image for use on the

In the *Faith* era George worked with Stylorouge and several photographers, resulting in some intense and striking portraiture

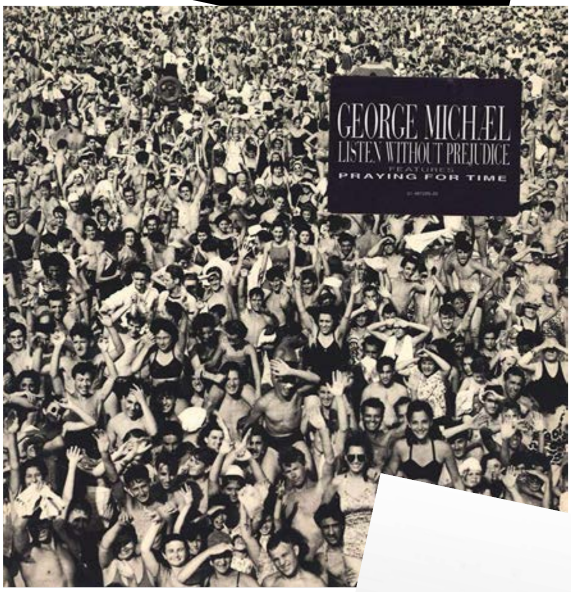
> "We designed dozens of icons for the *Faith* sleeve, then George came in one day and said 'I've been working on this myself and these are the five I like'. For him they represented faith, music, money, fame and love"
>
> **ROB O'CONNOR**

sleeve. Who it is under the sheets was a secret at the time… and according to Wedge, it remains a secret to this very day.

For the next couple of singles from *Faith*, *Father Figure* and the album's title track, George returned again to the album's design team Stylorouge for creative support. These sleeves put the artist up front, with some striking portraiture by Brian Aris and Chris Cuffaro respectively. Both photographers were highly regarded in their fields, with impressive pop portfolios. George Michael was clearly on a mission to work with only the best in the industry and was now seemingly confident about fronting his own record sleeves again. Or was he?

In a creative volte-face, the final three singles released from the album returned to pure typography and resulted in some of the most minimal designs of his entire career. *Monkey* set the tone with its simple black on white, and George had a hand in this – as Norman Moore, the sleeve's designer, would attest. "As I recall, our first meeting to discuss the cover was in his dressing room at the music video shoot on a sound stage somewhere," Moore says. "He was very charming and respectful of the design process. I'm fairly sure it was George's idea to put the photograph on the back and just have the title type on the front. I had the title typeset very small, then Xeroxed it to make it distressed-looking, and enlarged it with a photostat machine. George really liked the effect and the simple black on white, but asked if I could add an accent over the 'e'. If there was a reason for the accent, I have forgotten it. It may just have been an aesthetic affectation… why not?"

By 1990 George's status as a mature artist was being reflected in the design work, all created with Simon Halfon. With *Praying For Time*, Halfon and Michael received a co-credit for a style that followed on from previous singles, *One More Try* and *Kissing A Fool*, with a



restrained, purely typographic aesthetic. The album *Listen Without Prejudice Vol.1* would, however, take another different direction. Its cover image featured a cropped section of a 1942 photograph titled *Crowd At Coney Island* by Arthur Fellig, a noted US press photographer who worked under the pseudonym of Weegee.

Simon Halfon worked closely with George Michael during this period. "I had known George since the Wham! days and first started

Above: *Praying For Time* and the *Listen…* shot by noir/crime photographer Weegee, who danced and shouted to get the Coney Island crowd's attention

> "For *Outside*, Magnum had a selection of beautifully gritty photos of convicts and arrestees. Some people believed it was George, but it wasn't. There was an alternative idea of some silver Gucci handcuffs"
>
> **GREG JAKOBEK**

working with him on the *Listen Without Prejudice* album cover," Halfon said. "There were some big shoes to fill, following in the footsteps of great designers.

"*Listen Without Prejudice* is such a simple sleeve that it still stands the test of time – and if I had to pick one piece of work that was a personal favourite, it would be this. The single sleeves were just photographs by Russell Young with no typography on the front, definitely inspired by Peter Saville. George and I worked together on and off after that time, including on *Symphonica*."

Left: a serious, besuited George in a shot used for the cover of *Fastlove*, marking the start of a period working with designer Greg Jakobek

By 1998, George was out, proud and loud, and his single *Outside* famously became his way of making light of an incident that could easily have seen the end of his career. In many ways it was a song of sexual liberation, with a subtle pastoral cover design that contrasted the themes inherent in the song's lyrics. The single was included on his *Ladies & Gentlemen* best-of album that same year – another not-so-subtle lavatorial reference.

During this period George worked closely with graphic designer Greg Jakobek, who began working with George on the 1996 single *Fastlove*. "At that time I had moved my studio to his offices in Highgate, not only to work on his releases but also for other artists he'd signed to his newly-formed record company, called Aegean," says Jakobek.

TAKING IT TO THE CLUBS

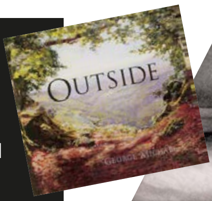
POURING HIS SOUL INTO AIDS AWARENESS

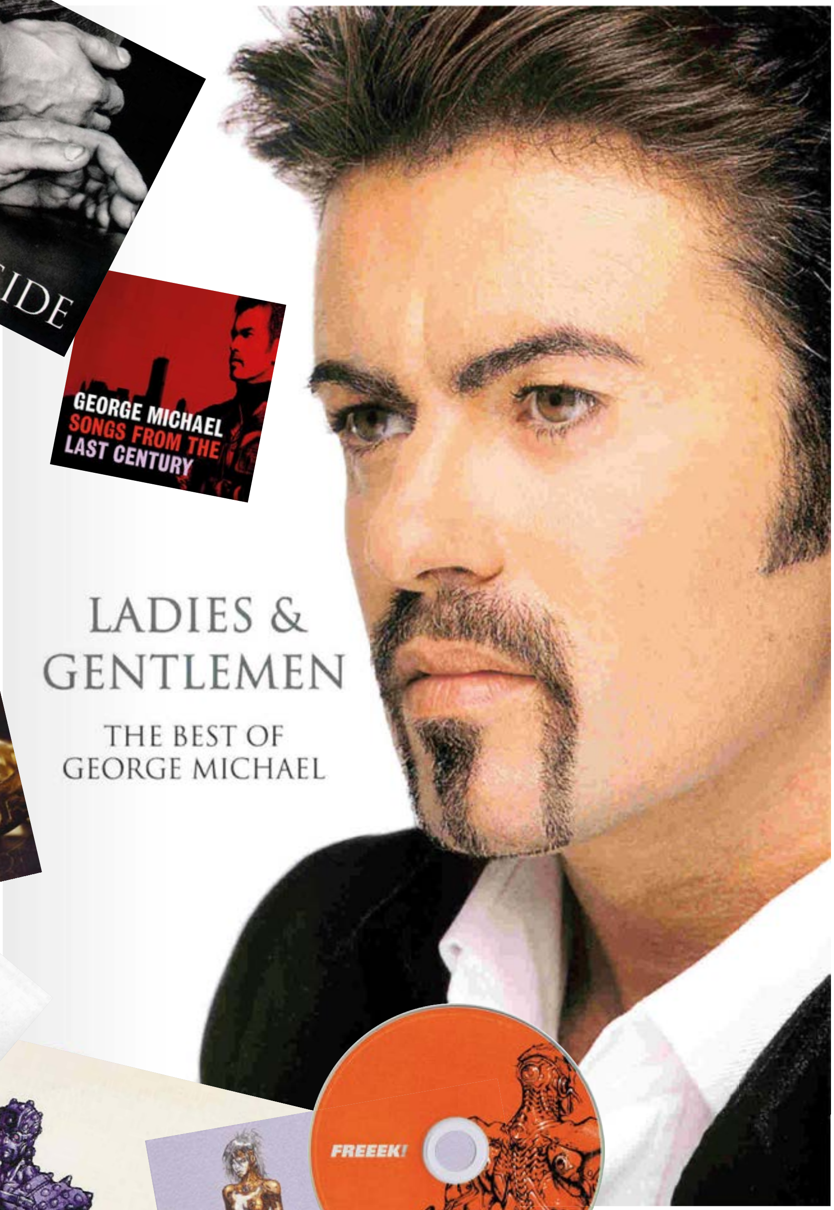
The six relatively fallow years that followed the release of *Listen Without Prejudice* in 1990 were largely due to George finding himself in another record label legal dispute. During this period he dedicated his creativity to many philanthropic causes. The Red Hot charity was very close to his heart; it has raised millions for HIV/AIDS awareness, research and relief, and in 1992 George was instrumental in bringing the *Red Hot + Dance* album to fruition, providing three brand new songs to the compilation that were originally written for his aborted *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 2* album. The CD was accompanied by a documentary, shown on MTV.

Rob O'Connor from Stylorouge remembers working on the sleeve design in 1992. "George effectively put the cover together at our studio," he explains. "We acted as designer/artworkers, really. I believe he was involved in curating the tracklisting and he was instrumental in procuring the use of the Keith Haring cover image, and even selected the typestyle for the title treatment."

The single *Too Funky* trailed the release of the album and went on to become a worldwide smash, with its sleeve showing George with his new short haircut, almost hiding in the shadows against a bright white background – another creative collaboration between Simon Halfon and photographer Russell Young.

Right: two very different presentations of the ***Outside*** concept. Below: Jakobek's work on ***Patience*** and its singles ***Amazing*** and ***Flawless***





"George really was very hands-on, especially at the beginning, but over the years he became less so. I worked on a lot of singles for George, including *Outside,* which was great. We sourced a photo from Magnum – we had a large selection of beautiful gritty photos of convicts and arrestees, and we used a close crop of one of these. Some people believed it was George, but it wasn't. There was an alternative idea of just having a shot of some silver Gucci handcuffs – yes, there is such a thing! – but it didn't look great.

"One of my fondest memories was flying to the recording studio in New York when George was working on *Songs From The Last Century*. The sleeve was designed on a laptop in the recording studio over a weekend, with George passing comments between vocals. We used some great photographs by Andrew MacPherson. I'm also really proud of the design work for the *Patience* album and its singles *Flawless* and *Amazing* from 2004."

An illustrative approach is sometimes the perfect solution for a record cover design, and George Michael wasn't averse to embracing this approach where appropriate. For his 2002 single *Freeek!* he worked with acclaimed comic book artist Stephen Platt, who devised a series of fetishistic costumes for use in the song's promotional video and images for its sleeves. He also worked with M-I-E animation studios in 2008 on the video and sleeve for his Christmas single *December Song*, and M-I-E created a beautifully poignant package for the campaign.

Fans will no doubt have their own favourite Wham! and George Michael sleeve designs, but the diversity of styles, collaborators and themes that he chose to employ during his career are testament to a creative vision and a fearless self-confidence that were in evidence from the start to the end. ■

Left: ***Freeek!*** by LA comic book artist Stephen Platt, who also designed costumes for the video. Below: 2009's ***December Song,*** with design (and video) by M-I-E

CLASSIC ALBUM

OLDER

WORKING THROUGH THE GRIEF OF LOSING HIS PARTNER, GEORGE EMERGES FROM A SELF-IMPOSED PERIOD OF SONGWRITING SILENCE WITH A POIGNANT MASTERPIECE LACED WITH HOPE…

STEVE HARNELL

It took George Michael more than half a decade to release the follow-up to *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1*, but spurred on by personal tragedy and a dogged defiance, he created his finest work – the expansive third solo album *Older*.

George himself sees the record as his most artistically accomplished, and, in his homeland, it became the most commercially successful of his career – a record-breaking six singles reached the Top 3 across a two-year span.

Older was released on 14 May 1996, three days after the Knebworth feeding frenzy that saw Oasis sell 250,000 tickets in the blink of an eye. Britpop was at its peak, but George was in no mood to hang on to the coattails of this Anglocentric revisionist movement. Typically, he stuck to his guns, and *Older*'s reference points remained his trademark touchstones of soul, R&B and pop, only this time often given a jazzier twist.

Although Michael deftly weaved in synthesised electronic touches to the up-tempo tracks and the stripped-back minimalism of *It Doesn't Really Matter*, the overall ambience of *Older* is of a more organic record, featuring splashes of brass and occasional string arrangements. One of the major musical inspirations – *Older* is dedicated to him in the liner notes – is Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim, credited with bringing bossa nova to the masses and the man behind the iconic hit *The Girl From Ipanema*.

Even more fundamental to the genesis of the eventual record thematically is George's late partner Anselmo Feleppa, who died in 1993. *Jesus To A Child*, the almost unbearably poignant ballad that opens the album, served as the first of many tributes to Anselmo on *Older*. Within a week of writing it, George was singing it in front of the Brandenburg Gate at the MTV Europe Music Awards in November 1994. "I wrote the best, most healing piece of music. It was all systems go from that moment on," Michael revealed.

In the *Freedom* documentary the singer added: "The whole experience of losing Anselmo, the period of grief, roughly two years where I didn't write a note of music [came before] the absolute knowledge that the next album I was going to write would be about grief and recovery. *Older* is my greatest moment.

"I sat at a keyboard and played a very simple string part, stream of consciousness rubbish comes out of my head, then I sang 'like Jesus to a child' and I thought 'Oh my God, that's him [Anselmo] and me'. I was so excited that I finally had been able to put my feelings about Anselmo into words."

Returning to Sarm West Studios where he cut *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1*, this time George had Jon Douglas on board to share production duties on three tracks. Douglas had a background in soul and R&B, having already worked with Eternal, Gabrielle and Pauline Henry (he'd later be behind hits for Louise Redknapp and team up with Sugababes, Kylie and All Saints, alongside further collaborations with George). Douglas first met the singer in 1995 while producing Lisa Moorish's cover of the Wham! classic *I'm Your Man*. Michael provided backing vocals on

> "I sat at a keyboard and played a simple string part, then I sang 'like Jesus to a child' and thought, 'Oh my God, that's him and me'. I was so excited I had finally been able to put my feelings into words" GEORGE MICHAEL

TRACKLISTING

SIDE A
- Jesus To A Child
- Fastlove
- Older
- Spinning The Wheel
- It Doesn't Really Matter

SIDE B
- The Strangest Thing
- To Be Forgiven
- Move On
- Star People
- You Have Been Loved
- Free

THE PLAYERS

RELEASED
14 May 1996

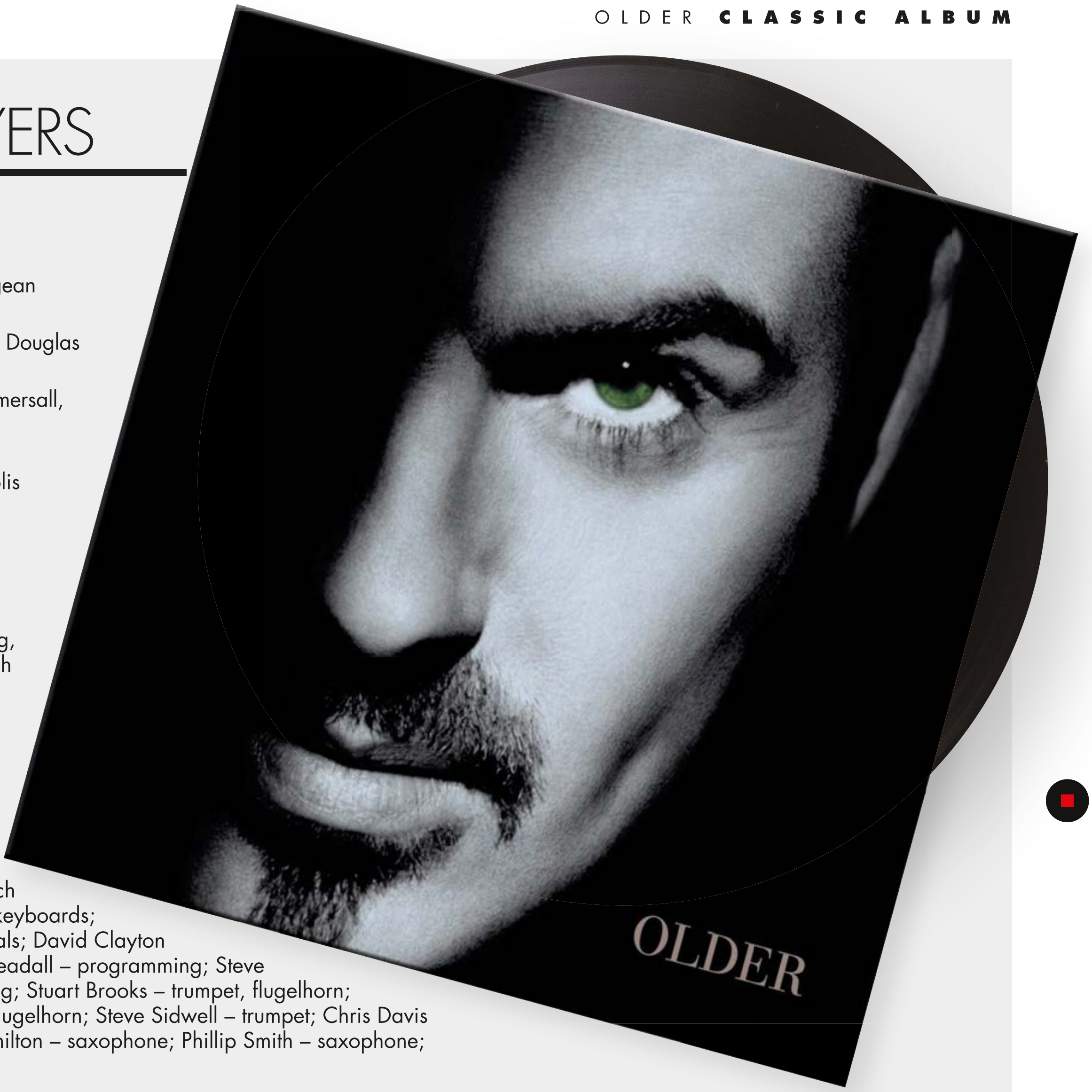
LABEL
Virgin/Dreamworks/Aegean

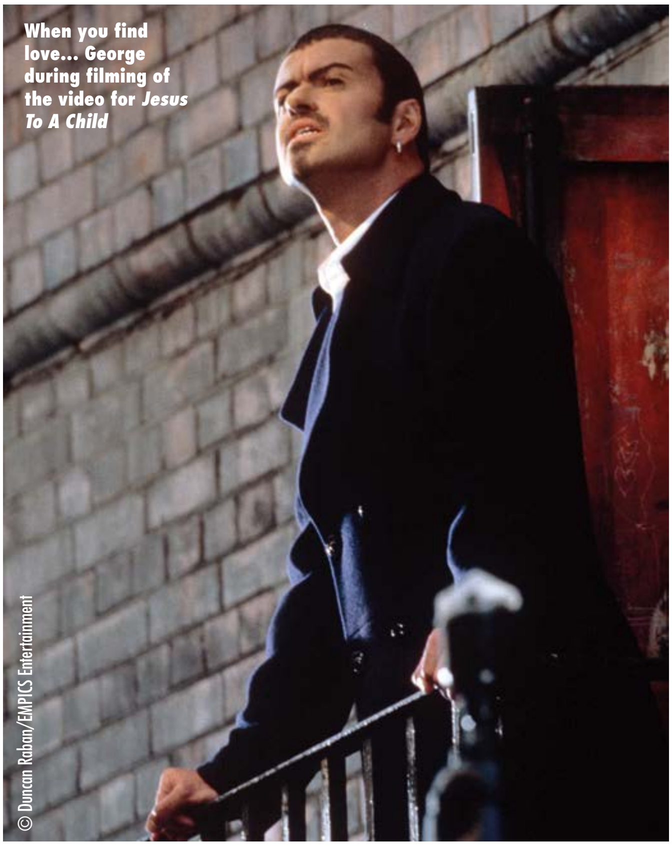
PRODUCED BY
George Michael and Jon Douglas

ENGINEERS
Charlie Brocco, Paul Gomersall, Chris Porter, Ren Swan

RECORDED AT
Sarm West and Metropolis Studios, London

PERSONNEL
George Michael – lead vocals, bass guitar, keyboards, drums, percussion, programming, arranger, producer; Hugh Burns – guitar; Danny Jacob – guitar; Alan Ross – guitar; John Themis – guitar; David Austin – keyboards; Chris Cameron – keyboards, strings; David Clews – keyboards; Nick Murdoch – piano; Jon Douglas – keyboards; Jo Bryant – backing vocals; David Clayton – programming; Pete Gleadall – programming; Steve McNichol – programming; Stuart Brooks – trumpet, flugelhorn; John Thirkell – trumpet, flugelhorn; Steve Sidwell – trumpet; Chris Davis – saxophone; Andy Hamilton – saxophone; Phillip Smith – saxophone; Fayyaz Virji – trombone





When you find love... George during filming of the video for *Jesus To A Child*

© Duncan Raban/EMPICS Entertainment

the sessions and the pair immediately hit it off.

Themes of grief, recovery and mortality are threaded throughout *Older*'s 11 tracks. The finely-honed collection came together slowly, with Michael spending three years working on the new material.

It's arguably the most diverse LP of his career. After the elegant opening ballad comes the upbeat, dancefloor-friendly *Fastlove*, which explores the theme of using promiscuous sex as escapism. Meanwhile, *Spinning The Wheel* flips the theme of promiscuity to warn of its danger in an era where the spectre of HIV and AIDS remained a major concern.

"For anyone who had a clue about symbolism, I was coming out," George later explained. "*Fastlove* makes me laugh because it's all about cruising and covering my pain, blunting out that pain with fast love, simple as that. There's not one track that's not about Anselmo or the risk of AIDS [for example, *Spinning The Wheel*]."

For a six-month period while he was recording *Older*, George felt in reasonable spirits but then discovered that his mother had been diagnosed with cancer. She died of the disease in February 1997. Indeed, as George worked through his grief for Anselmo and worry about the health of his mother, the tone of the LP veered between searing insights into loss and devastation and a defiant sense of hope. The bare-bones *It Doesn't Really Matter* – just a beatbox, simple keyboard and a few piano flourishes – leaves George's vocal space to breathe on a song that seems measured and philosophical about a relationship that's now in the past.

THE BIG PICTURE
THE VIDEOS

JESUS TO A CHILD
DIRECTOR: HOWARD GREENHALGH

George's devastating tribute to his late partner, Anselmo Feleppa, is packed full of imagery of grief and loss. Allusions to solitude abound in the promo, and the pain in his eyes is clear for all to see. Although this introspective ballad was an unorthodox lead single for *Older*, its importance in Michael's back catalogue cannot be overstated. A No.1 in the UK, it set the success of its parent album in motion.
youtu.be/zNBj4EV_hAo

FASTLOVE
DIRECTOR: VAUGHAN ARNELL & ANTHEA BENTON

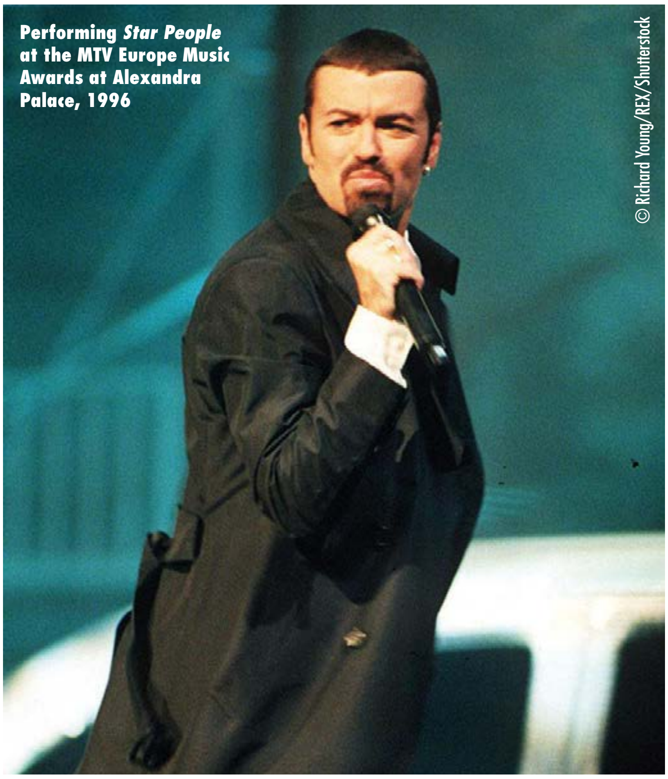
A sinisterly-lit George holds court in a speaker-packed chair with a remote in hand as he flips through countless exotically-garbed virtual reality-style sex partners, both male and female. The 'Fony' legend written on the side of his headphones is a knowing nod to his major label contract dispute. The rainstorm sequence sees George reinstate his trademark Wham! clap, looking cool amid the downpour.
youtu.be/SHAQlFq6TFg

SPINNING THE WHEEL
DIRECTOR: VAUGHAN ARNELL & ANTHEA BENTON

Like *Fastlove*, this quintessential Nineties vid was helmed by Vaughan Arnell and Anthea Benton. Ditching *Fastlove*'s futurism, *Spinning The Wheel* opts for moody black and white, making full use of the song's jazzy inspiration – we could almost be in a pre-war Harlem nightclub. Perched behind a keyboard, George is on finger-snapping form for this subtle warning against unprotected sex.
youtu.be/qSoMTkn_Qfg

OLDER
DIRECTOR: ANDY MORAHAN

With regular videographer Andy Morahan back behind the lens, this was a stately affair set in dusty, sun-drenched countryside. Featuring George shot in focus against blurry backgrounds, a sense of dislocation seeps through the screen. A Top 3 for the 7" in the UK cemented *Older*'s position as his most commercially successful album and string of singles of his career on home soil.
youtu.be/04-9GvOFMLg



Performing *Star People* at the MTV Europe Music Awards at Alexandra Palace, 1996

© Richard Young/REX/Shutterstock

"For anyone who had a clue about symbolism, I was coming out. *Fastlove* makes me laugh because it's all about cruising and covering my pain, blunting out that pain with fast love, simple as that" GEORGE MICHAEL

But the songwriter's torture is never too far from the surface. The world music vibe of *The Strangest Thing* inhabits a track shot through with pain where *"time has been twisting the knife"*. George's heart-on-the-sleeve lyric adds: "*Take my hand; Lead me to some peaceful land that I cannot find inside my head"*. The wistful Burt Bacharach and Antonio Carlos Jobim-influenced *To Be Forgiven* is similarly pained ("*Save me from myself*").

But *Older*'s story can't be summarised as one-note wallowing in self-pity – Michael's a far more rounded songwriter than that. *Move On* is a wonderful anthem of hope, with deft supper club atmospherics added to underpin the track's jazzy arrangement. Self-aware it may be, but this is no simplistic self-help manual. Michael's nuanced lyrics would provide a balm for many people suffering grief in the years that have followed.

There's spirit, too, in the confrontational *Star People*, where George distances himself from the showbiz pack, musing that their desperate search for fame and approbation comes from a need to fill the hole of an unhappy childhood.

The heart-breaking *You Have Been Loved* – once again written as a tribute to Anselmo – is a desolate ballad of loss and a return to the idea of an unloving God touched upon in the previous album's *Praying For Time*. An ode to humanism in a cruel world, its tone is measured – a songwriter at last at peace with the traumas that have befallen him.

Free, the sweeping cinematic instrumental with nods to trip-hop that closes the album, draws the curtain on an emotional epic. "Feels good… to be free", George whispers quietly at the end. His art had brought him to a place of peace… at least for the time being.

Snapped outside the stars' hangout of the glitzy Spago restaurant in Beverly Hills, California, August 1997

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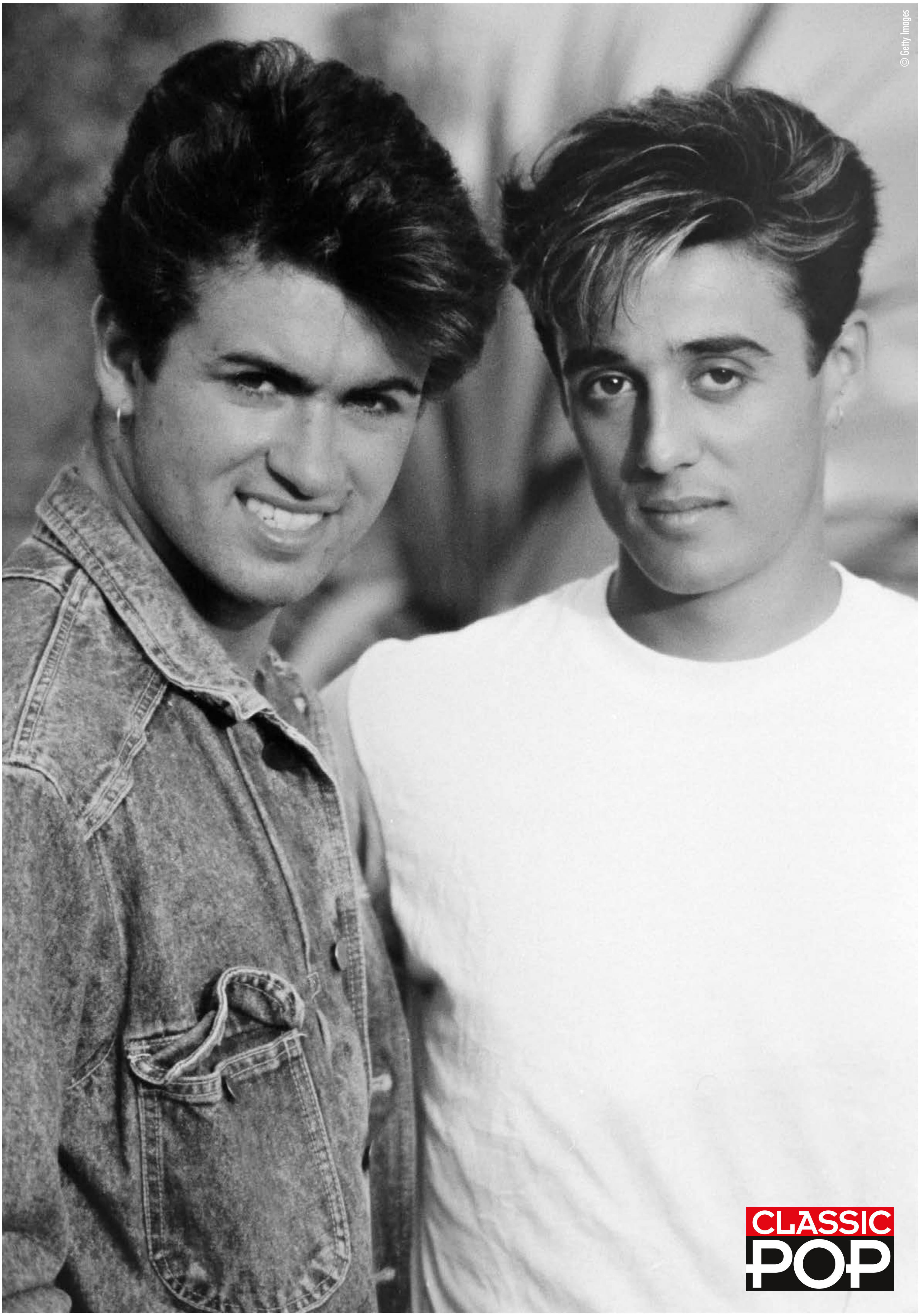

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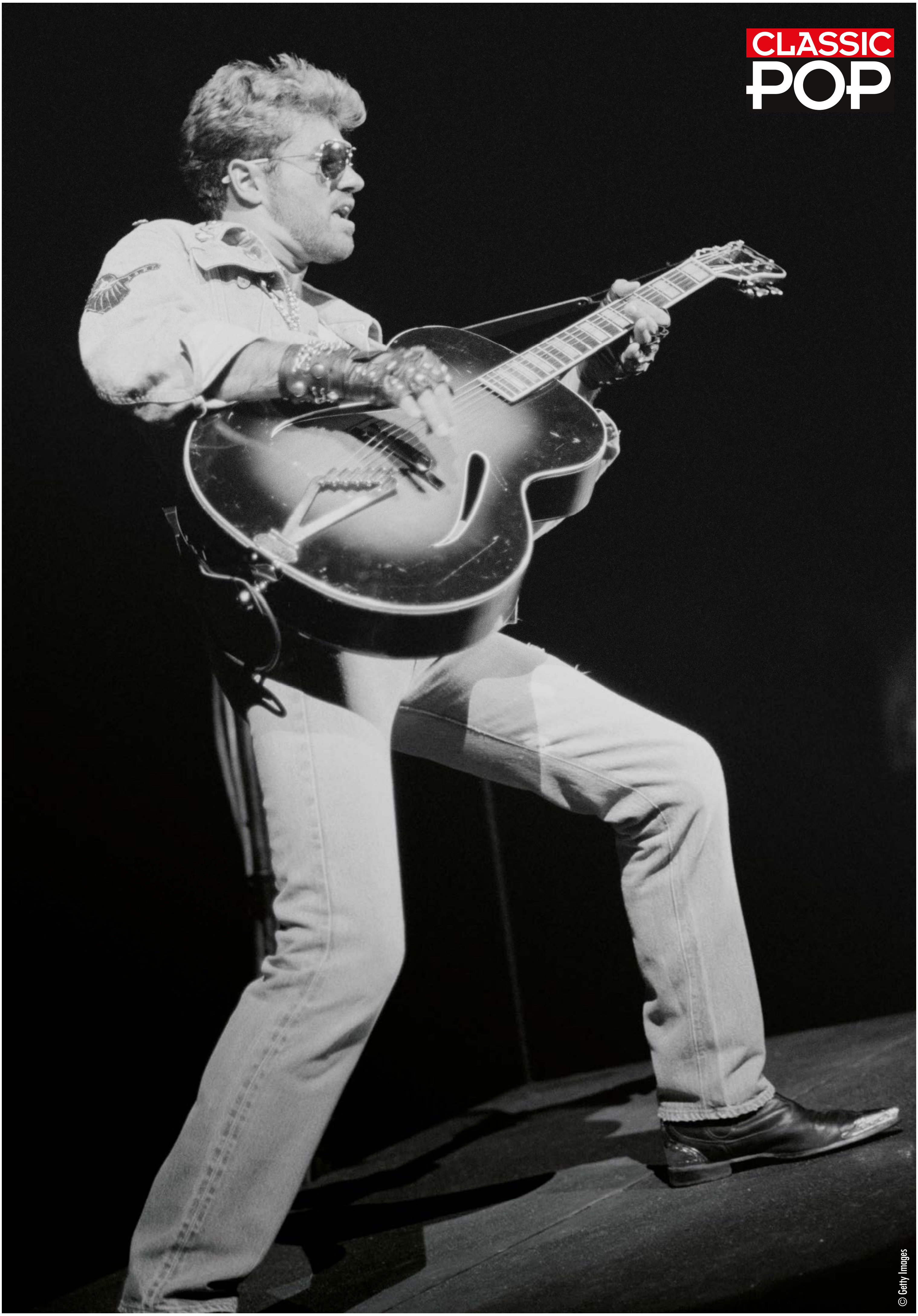

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TOP 40 *greatest* WHAM! + GEORGE MICHAEL *tracks*

RANGING FROM JOYOUSLY IRRESISTIBLE FINGER-CLICKING POP EARWORMS TO MATURE AND STUNNINGLY-PRODUCED REFLECTIONS ON LIFE, LOVE AND LOSS, *CLASSIC POP* ATTEMPTS TO COMPRESS THE BREADTH OF GEORGE MICHAEL'S DUO-TO-SOLO CAREER INTO THE TIME-HONOURED TOP 40 FORMAT…

IAN WADE

George giving his all at the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert, April 1992
© Mick Hutson/Redferns

With some George Michael songs ranking among the most famous of the last few decades, you might imagine his 34-year career to be chockablock with hits. However, the actual smashes listing is surprisingly slim. Official Wham! albums (*Make It Big*, *Fantastic* and half of *The Final*) offer up no more than two dozen songs in a laser-precision career, half of which were top five hits, four of them actual No.1s (*Last Christmas* managed a paltry No.2 and had to settle for becoming the biggest-selling runner-up in UK chart history). As a solo turn, George's five studio albums offered up 55 tracks, and each of those albums had at least 70 per cent of their contents released as a single in one form or another. Of course, there are also numerous one-off singles, charity projects and collaborations, both credited and uncredited.

Listening back to his output as a whole, one is left with an overwhelming impression of a perfectionist at work. Yes, he could have pulled his finger out and left us with another couple of albums, but what remains are some of the most famous songs of all time… and a legacy of few mis-steps.

For the purpose of this list, we focused on singles, ideally official ones released during his lifetime, and not some grotty opportunist fan-fleecing exercise (we're looking at YOU, Club Fantastic Megamix). It was a tough list to narrow down, and some inclusions may raise eyebrows. Runner-ups include his version of Rufus Wainwright's *Going To A Town*, album gems such as *My Mother Had A Brother*, spare singles such as *Waiting For That Day* and *Starpeople*, plus Wham! nuggets like *A Ray Of Sunshine* and *Where Did Your Heart Go*. It's also bad news for Toby Bourke… and we felt it was, shall we say, unfair to pitch Andrew's solo efforts alongside George's.

The inevitable bangers are all present, as are some of the lesser singles that indicate where he was on his artistic path. Over a quarter of our chart is taken up by UK chart-toppers – four with Wham! and seven solo – and some of the songs that you maybe assumed were massive, but actually weren't. It's a catalogue of iconic singles that have raised millions for charities since 1991: songs about life on the dole, Club 18-30 holidays and the Iraq War; heartbreaking ballads about bad lovers and lost loves; songs about coming out, going out and being yourself; that one about a lousy Christmas… and there's a fair bit of sex, too, be it monogamous, no strings attached, cyber or illicit outdoor shenanigans. So settle in for a voyage of a man who wanted to be famous, became famous… and wasn't wild about it.

01

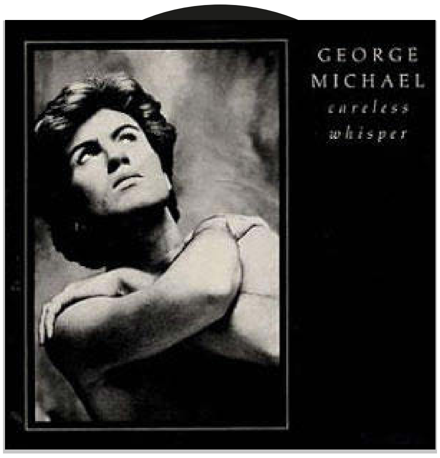
WHAM RAP! (ENJOY WHAT YOU DO)
RECORD LABEL **INNERVISION**
RELEASED **1982**

Following *The Message* and *Rapper's Delight*, bands such as Modern Romance, Haircut 100 and Spandau Ballet flirted with rap, but no one had gone full 'lyrical flow', especially not on a debut single. This Brit-funk banger failed to ignite in June 1982 but reached No.8 when re-released after the success of *Young Guns* at the start of 1983. Even Paul Weller admired the unemployment-tackling lyrics, and the Special AKA poked fun at it with *Bright Lights* in 1984.

02

YOUNG GUNS (GO FOR IT)
RECORD LABEL **INNERVISION**
RELEASED **1982**

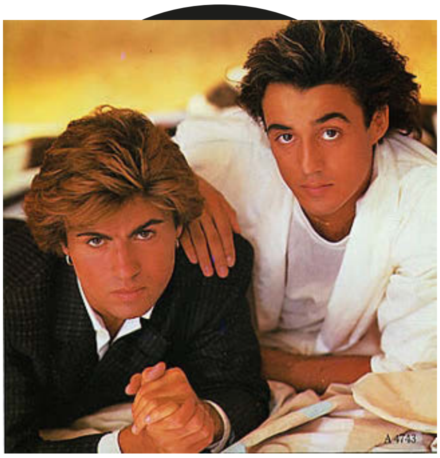
Had someone who worked on *Saturday Superstore* not spotted Wham! performing in Stringfellows, their history would have been very different. Having made that TV debut with the addition of Dee C Lee and Shirlie Holliman, *Top Of The Pops* invited them on to the show as a last-minute replacement for another turn, even though the song lay outside the Top 40. A few weeks later, they found themselves with a Top 3 single. Oh, and the female vocal isn't Dee or Shirlie – it's session singer Lynda Haynes.



06

CARELESS WHISPER
RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1984**

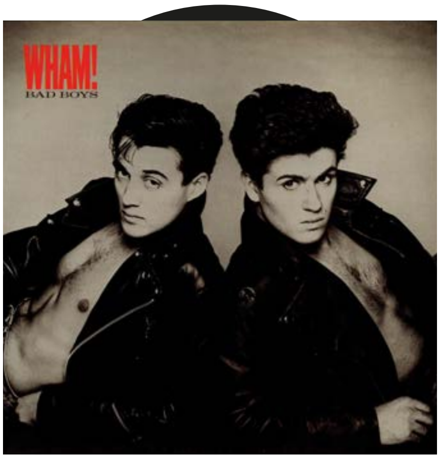
A bold move, launching a solo career just after you've had your band's first No.1 with a line about "not planning on going solo" in it – but George was a canny operator. Written by the pair when they were only 17, the version they recorded topped the charts in 25 countries and sold six million copies. "I'm still a bit puzzled why it's made such an impression on people," said George to *The Big Issue* in 2009. "I was only 17 and didn't know much about anything – and certainly nothing much about relationships."



07

FREEDOM
RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1984**

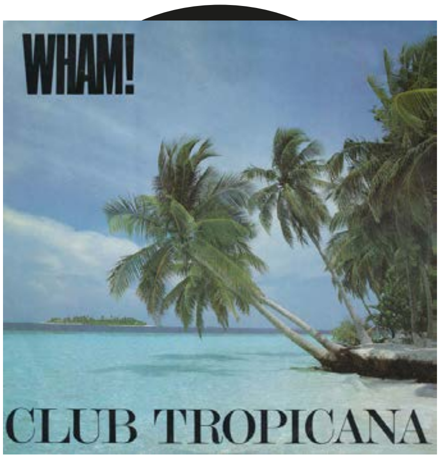
A nod to soul and Motown, *Freedom* was even released in mono at the time. It became the duo's second No.1 and reached No.3 in the US. This song, George believes, was where his talents really began to shine. "I thought, 'I can't believe I've just done that!' I was absolutely thrilled. Because until then I had no real understanding of my abilities, but with *Freedom*, I started to take myself seriously as a writer." The chorus would be replayed using an organ setting on a DX7 synth at the start of *Faith*.



03

BAD BOYS
RECORD LABEL **INNERVISION**
RELEASED **1983**

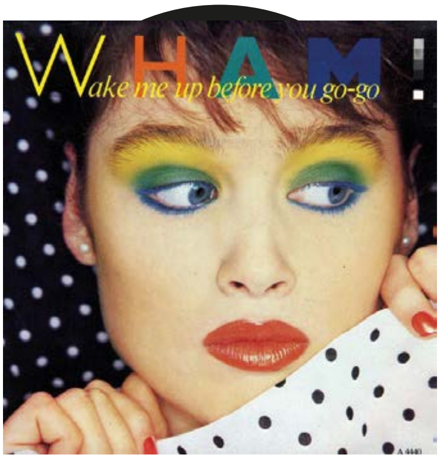
Keen to capitalise on *Young Guns*, George hastily knocked up a romp about teen rebellion accompanied with a hugely camp video with the leathered-up duo looking like highly unconvincing teenagers. "I wrote to a formula for *Bad Boys*… that's something I'd never done before and have never done since," he admitted. While most people would make the most of a No.2 single, George's feelings were made known. Fans were disappointed when it failed to make it onto 1997's *The Best Of Wham*.



04

CLUB TROPICANA
RECORD LABEL **INNERVISION**
RELEASED **1983**

Breaking from the strident Brit-funk of the first few releases, *Club Tropicana* solidified Wham! as a true pop package. During this period George was in court trying to get out of his deal with Innervision, but that seemed miles away as he and Andrew – dressed as airline pilots, with Dee and Shirlie as air hostesses – cavorted about in Speedos and drank cocktails in Ibiza in the legendary video, sending up the Club 18-30 cheap package holiday boom. It became their fourth Top 10 hit in nine months, hitting No.4.



05

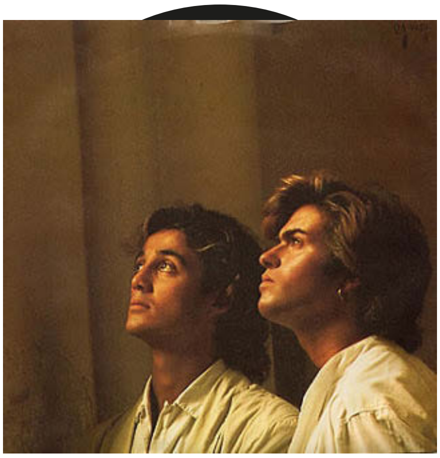
WAKE ME UP BEFORE YOU GO GO
RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1984**

Famously based on a note that Andrew had left on his bedroom door, this was George's tribute to pop from the Fifties and Sixties, featuring nods to familiar elements of past hits. The real drummer George had planned to use was late, so he kept the Linn drum beat he'd used on the demo. Heralded as a surefire No.1 – the duo believed it would enter at that position, something very few acts managed in those days – it entered at No.4 and jitterbugged to the top the week after.

08

LAST CHRISTMAS
RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1984**

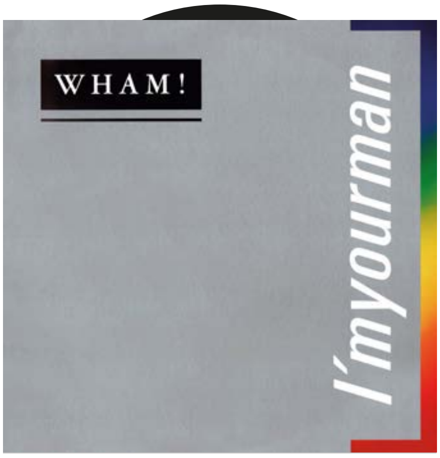
It would have been nice to end 1984 with a third (or fourth) No.1, but Band Aid's rush-released juggernaut *Do They Know It's Christmas* blew everything else out of the water (although George appeared on that too). All the same, this became the biggest-selling No.2 of all time, with UK sales of just under two million. It's also one of the most streamed Christmas songs ever, with its annual reappearance in the charts now as much a part of the season as disappointing crackers and flammable jumpers.



09

EVERYTHING SHE WANTS
RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1984**

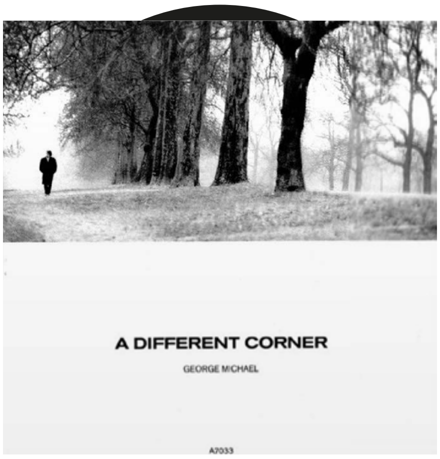
Released as a double A-side with *Last Christmas*, *Everything She Wants* – the fourth track taken from *Make It Big* – helped buoy sales into the new year when DJs flipped the record over. The song tells the tale of a man in a loveless marriage, realising that with the news of a baby he can't easily back out of it (it could quite feasibly be the subject of *Young Guns* reflecting on his lot). When it reached No.1 in the US, Wham! became the first band since the Bee Gees to have scored three chart-toppers from one album.



10

I'M YOUR MAN
RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1985**

Ten months in pop is a lifetime, so when Wham! spent much of 1985 away from the charts and touring around the world, these portents of doom – plus George's fresh beard – suggested that they were about to split. The song was, George declared, all about sex, and a video filmed at The Marquee club rammed this point home. Released in September, *I'm Your Man* became the duo's third UK No.1, and was the last song they performed together at their Final show at Wembley Stadium the following year.



11

A DIFFERENT CORNER

RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1986**

George was still technically half of Wham! when he released his first 'proper' solo single – *Careless Whisper* has been billed as 'Wham! featuring George Michael' in many territories – and he was only the second – after Stevie Wonder – to hit the No.1 spot with a song written, arranged, performed and produced by one artist. "I was only 19," he revealed to an audience in 2014. "The best critique I ever heard of that song was from a friend of mine who said, 'It's beautiful… pathetic, but beautiful.'"

12

THE EDGE OF HEAVEN

RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1986**

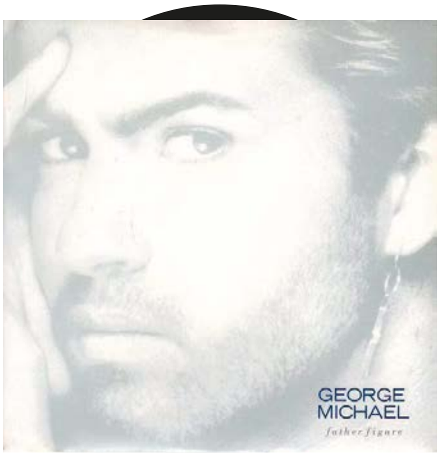
So that was it: the rumours were true. As *A Different Corner* hit the top of the charts, George and Andrew announced they would bow out with a single, album and concert in June. Released as a double-pack single with an updated *Wham Rap!*, plus *Battlestations* and a cover of Was (Not Was)'s *Where Did Your Heart Go*, the single became their fourth and final No.1. George reckoned no one listened to Wham! lyrics, so had written *The Edge Of Heaven* as "deliberately and overtly sexual, especially the first verse".

13

I KNEW YOU WERE WAITING FOR ME

RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1987**

An ambition of George's was to record with Aretha Franklin, and the pair teamed up on this Narada Michael Walden-produced track and scored a transatlantic No.1 in January 1987. The writers were Simon Climie and Dennis Morgan; it became Aretha's only UK chart-topper compared to George's third (or seventh, including Wham!) and only her second in the US, almost 20 years after *Respect*. It won a Grammy for Best R&B Duo/Group Performance.



16

FATHER FIGURE

RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1987**

Released as the third single off *Faith*, *Father Figure* was an altogether more mysterious affair compared to the country-billy romp of the previous single. The video, with George as a cabbie who picks up model Tania Coleridge, further established his heterosexuality for US buyers, although he'd admitted he'd had sex with men at this point. It earned director Andy Morahan an MTV award. Spoiling his run of Top 10 singles when it stalled at No.11 in the UK, it spent two weeks at No.1 in the US in early 1988.

"I think you can tell that *A Different Corner* is genuinely the sound of a man whose heart's been broken. I was 19 and the best critique I heard of that song was from a friend of mine who said, 'It's beautiful… pathetic, but beautiful'"

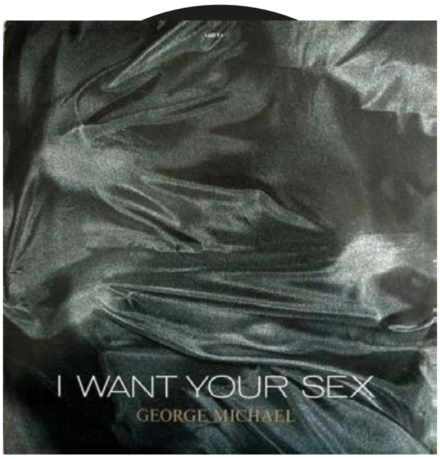
17

ONE MORE TRY

RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1987**

Possibly one of George's finest moments (even Elton John wishes he'd written it) *One More Try* featured one of his greatest vocal performances. It was a very personal song: George said it was "about my attitude coming out of my last relationship and into this new one when I was pretty unwilling to be open to anything". Another US No.1 on both the Billboard and R&B charts, it made No.8 in the UK. Incidentally, despite the ubiquity of the album at the time, none of the singles from *Faith* went to the top in Britain. Unbelievable.

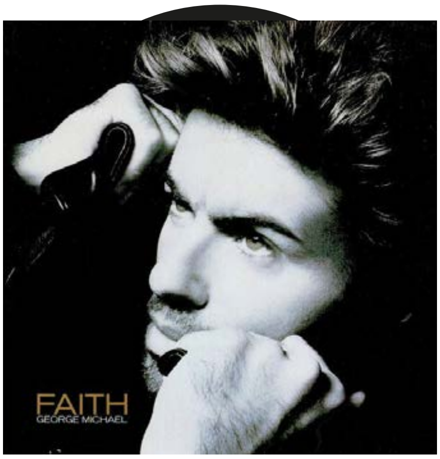
"The media has divided love and sex incredibly. The emphasis of the AIDS campaign has been on safe sex, but the campaign has missed relationships. It's missed emotion. It's missed monogamy. *I Want Your Sex* is about attaching lust to love, not just to strangers"



14

I WANT YOUR SEX
RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1987**

It's strange to conceive now the rumpus that George's ode to rumpo caused back in June 1987. The BBC banned it: Michael responded, saying "The media has divided love and sex incredibly. The emphasis of the AIDS campaign has been on safe sex, but the campaign has missed relationships. It's missed emotion. It's missed monogamy. *I Want Your Sex* is about attaching lust to love, not just to strangers." The equally fruity video featured him and his then-girlfriend, model Kathy Yeung, both mostly naked.



15

FAITH
RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1987**

While held off No.1 in the UK by the Bee Gees' *You Win Again, Faith* spent four weeks at the top in the US and went on to be the biggest-selling single of 1988. The iconic and knowingly camp imagery of the video, with George rocking out with a guitar was a sort-of marketing move, seeing as he didn't actually know how to play. His reasoning: "Americans – if you stick a guitar on, you've got a bigger penis, simple as that." *Smash Hits* cheekily took to asking him if he'd ever been sick in his cowboy boots.

18

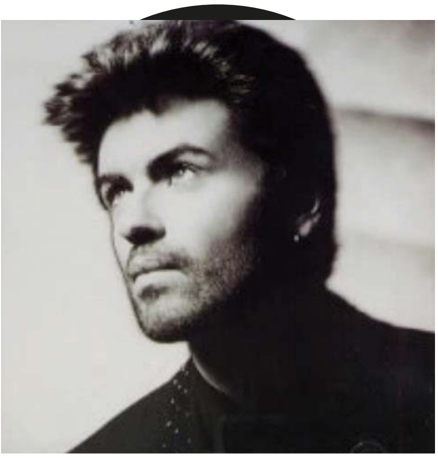
PRAYING FOR TIME
RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1990**

After finishing the *Faith* campaign and tour in the summer of 1989, George had wanted people to focus more on his songwriting. He told the *New York Times*: "No event inspired the song. It's my way of trying to figure out why it's so hard for people to be good to each other. I believe the problem is conditional as opposed to being something inherent in mankind." In the film that accompanied the reissued album in 2017, Liam Gallagher reckoned George displayed "Lennon in him" on this number.

19

FREEDOM! '90
RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1990**

Iconic, and possibly the one song that people would immediately think of with George Michael, *Freedom! '90* only managed a (for George) lowly No.28 position. The video, possibly just as iconic, was directed by David Fincher and featured supermodels direct from the cover of *Vogue* lip-syncing to the lyrics, intercut with symbols of George's past, most notably his *Faith* leather jacket and guitar, bursting into flames. It was covered by Robbie Williams as his hastily-released first solo single.



20

HEAL THE PAIN
RECORD LABEL **EPIC/1990**
RELEASED **1986**

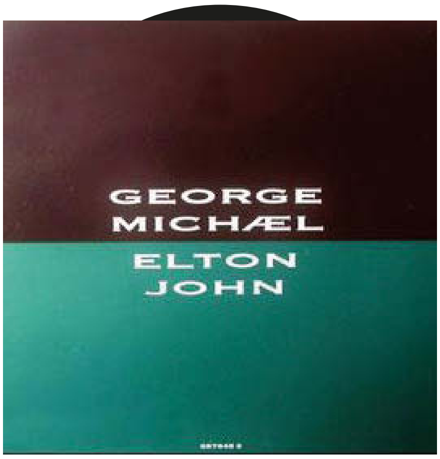
Heal The Pain had been a very Beatlesy-type number on *Listen Without Prejudice*, and on its original release as a single reached No.31 in 1991. In 2005, when appearing on Chris Evans' BBC Radio 2 show that December, George revealed that he had recorded a version of the track the previous week with Paul McCartney, in whose style the song was written. That version was later added to the greatest hits collection *Twenty Five* in 2006, and in 2008 it was released as a single in the US.

According to George, *Cowboys And Angels* concerned a short-lived multi-love dilemma: "It's about a strange love triangle involving a woman who's madly in love with me and a man who I was madly in love with, and none of it came to anything… but I got a good song out of it"

21

COWBOYS AND ANGELS
RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1990**

According to George, this song concerned a short-lived multi-love dilemma: "It's about a strange love triangle involving a woman who's madly in love with me and a man who I was madly in love with, and none of it came to anything… but I got a good song out of it." Reaching No.45, the single may not have been the hit it should have been but it works wonders in context of *Listen Without Prejudice* and is a fan favourite. The sax solo was by Andy Hamilton, who'd parped over Duran Duran's *Rio*.



22

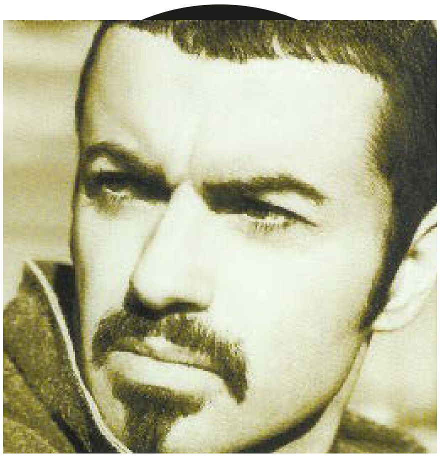
DON'T LET THE SUN GO DOWN ON ME
RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1991**

Elton and George first performed this song together at Live Aid in 1985, and George helped out on Elton's *Ice On Fire* album later that year. George performed it on his Cover To Cover tour, and for the final show at Wembley Arena on 23 March 1991 he brought out Elton as a surprise guest. It was the first time George had entered the UK singles chart at No.1, and it gave Elton – whose original had only reached No.16 in 1974 – his third chart-topper as a bonus.

26

FASTLOVE
RECORD LABEL **VIRGIN**
RELEASED **1996**

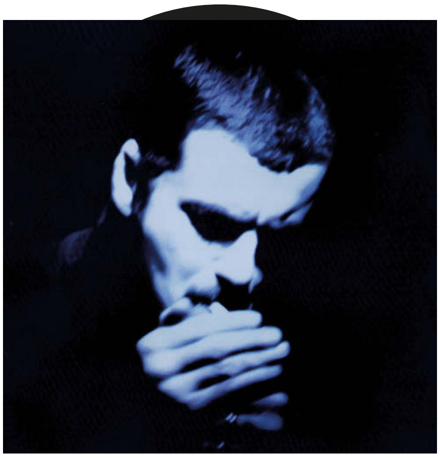
A song about no-strings-attached sex, wherein George nips out for a bit of frisky action, with the words "in the absence of security, I made my way into the night" suggesting that such nocturnal activities were something he'd been enjoying long before any arrests or tabloid exposés. Another straight-in-at-No.1 in the UK, the song interpolates Patrice Rushen's *Forget Me Nots*. Adele sang it at the Grammys when they paid tribute to him, restarting the song as Michael was "too important to her" to not get it right.



27

SPINNING THE WHEEL
RECORD LABEL **VIRGIN**
RELEASED **1996**

It's easy with the benefit of hindsight to believe that George's music was full of gay longing, but having skirted around and dallied with the subject for years, *Older* was possibly George's first album to address his homosexuality. *Spinning The Wheel*, a sort of 'open relationship blues', was almost a counterpart to *Fastlove*. Speaking to *Attitude*, he said: "It wasn't written from a personal point of view, where I was complaining about someone sleeping around. I suppose it sounded like that though, didn't it?"



28

I CAN'T MAKE YOU LOVE ME
RECORD LABEL **VIRGIN**
RELEASED **1997**

For the single release of *Older*'s title track, an EP was put together featuring album cut *The Strangest Thing* alongside covers of Antônio Carlos Jobim's *Desafinado*, in a duet with Astrud Gilberto, and Bonnie Raitt's *I Can't Make You Love Me*. Originally written by Mike Reid and Allen Shamblin, it first appeared on Raitt's 1991 album *Luck Of The Draw*. A top three hit for George in the double A-side format, this and *Desafinado* would appear on his *Ladies & Gentlemen* hits compilation instead of *Older*.

23

TOO FUNKY

RECORD LABEL **EPIC**
RELEASED **1992**

In 1992 George helped put together the compilation *Red Hot & Dance*, alongside numbers from Seal, Madonna and EMF as part of the Red Hot Benefit series that had been one of the first AIDS charity efforts from the music business. He donated three new tracks, *Happy, Do You Really Want to Know* and *Too Funky*. The latter became a Top 5 hit in the UK aided by a video reuniting some of the supers from his *Freedom '90* promo. With legal action just around the corner, this was his last single for Sony.

24

FIVE LIVE EP

RECORD LABEL **PARLOPHONE**
RELEASED **1992**

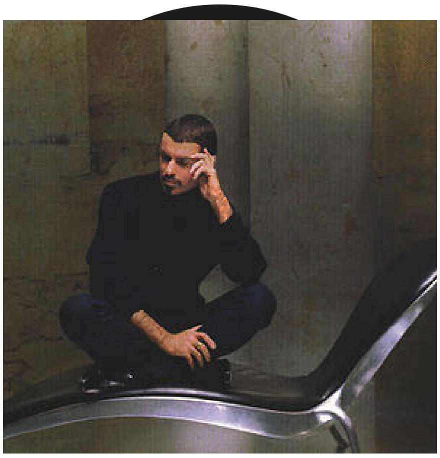
It would be a good round on *Pointless*, trying to remember who else past Metallica and Bowie joined Queen to perform at the Freddie Mercury Tribute at Wembley Stadium (you'd probably be in single-figure territory if you recalled that Paul Young, Seal and Liza Minnelli also had a sing). The highlight, however, was George Michael's set where he performed Queen's '39, was joined by Lisa Stansfield on *These Are The Days Of Our Lives* and stole the show with a rendition of *Somebody To Love*.

25

JESUS TO A CHILD

RECORD LABEL **VIRGIN**
RELEASED **1996**

Freed from contractual palavers, George was faced with far more pressing matters in 1993 when his lover Anselmo Feleppa died from an AIDS-related brain haemorrhage. After being unable to write for 18 months, George penned these lyrics in just under an hour. Having performed it at an MTV Awards in Berlin in 1994, the song was released in January 1996 and became a worldwide hit. According to Esther Rantzen, George secretly donated all the proceeds to her Childline charity.



29

YOU HAVE BEEN LOVED

RECORD LABEL **VIRGIN**
RELEASED **1997**

The *Older* campaign concluded with the release of *You Have Been Loved* as a double A-side with *The Strangest Thing '97*. Originally written for Anselmo, the song picked up additional airplay thanks to the national mood after the death of Princess Diana on August 31 that year (the airwaves heavily featured gentler singles such as The Verve's *The Drugs Don't Work* and Oasis' *Stand By Me*). George got to No.2 behind the overwhelming sales juggernaut that was Elton John's *Candle In The Wind '97* re-do.

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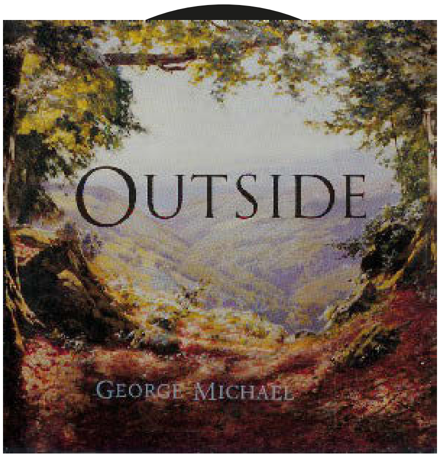
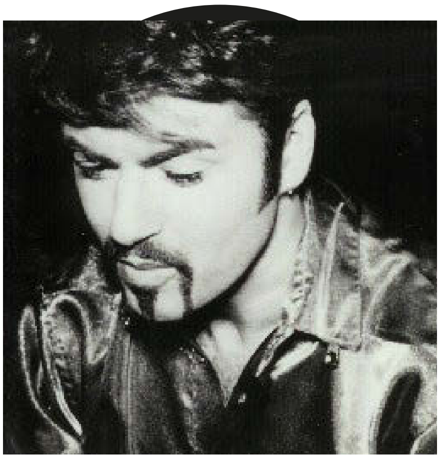


30

OUTSIDE

RECORD LABEL **SONY**
RELEASED **1998**

Just in case anybody was still on the fence regarding his sexuality, George Michael came out of the closet, turned it into firewood and torched it with *Outside*. Released ahead of his *Ladies & Gentleman* compilation, this joyous ode to alfresco fun came a few months after his arrest for indulging in 'lewd behaviour' at a Beverley Hills public toilet, resulting in a £500 fine and 80 hours of community service. Denied the top spot by Cher's *Believe*, it's gone on to become just as celebrated a gay anthem.



31

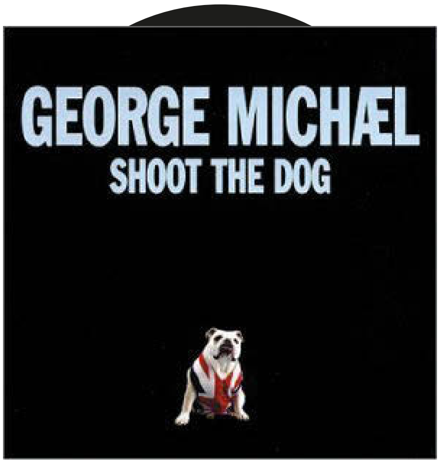
AS
RECORD LABEL **SONY**
RELEASED **1999**

The second new track recorded for *Ladies & Gentlemen* (but not included on the US version) was a cover of Stevie Wonder's *As*, in a duet with Mary J Blige. As Mary told *The Guardian*, "I grew up watching Wham! and George Michael on MTV. And when he met me, he was like: 'I love you! You're the greatest!' Just to be recognised by him was amazing. So the next day, when the scandal blew up, I was like: 'Oh shit!' But that never stopped me from loving him."

32

FREEEK!
RECORD LABEL **POLYDOR**
RELEASED **2002**

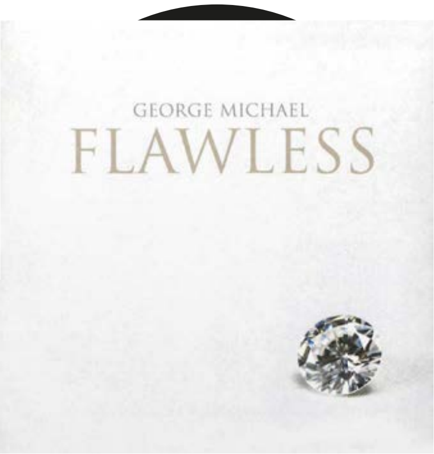
Having recharged his batteries after the release of *Songs From The Last Century*, George began the new century preparing his next album, which would arrive in 2004 in the shape of *Patience*. Structured around *Breathe And Stop* by Q-Tip, *Try Again* (Aaliyah) and *N.T.* (Kool & the Gang), the overtly sexual *Freeek!* dealt with how the internet was starting to impact modern romance, aided with a futuristic video by Joseph Kahn. It went to No.7 in March 2002.



33

SHOOT THE DOG
RECORD LABEL **POLYDOR**
RELEASED **2002**

Built around a sample of the Human League's 1981 classic *Love Action (I Believe In Love)*, *Shoot The Dog* saw George back in protest mode after 20 years against Blair and Bush, especially in the wake of the Gulf conflict. It faced a barrage of hostility. As he told Trevor McDonald ahead of release, "I'm not stupid – I knew I was going to walk into a wall of criticism because these are very reactionary times, but they're also very urgent times and I felt that I had to do this."



36

FLAWLESS (GO TO THE CITY)
RECORD LABEL **SONY**
RELEASED **2004**

Flawless had already been a hit for New York trio The Ones in 2001. George, aware that he may have picked up new young gay fans via *Outside*, wanted to celebrate them and the idea of heading to a city to be themselves. It was only after he went on a date and the freaked-out fan said he liked *Flawless* that he went for it. He told *Attitude*, "Don't you think that's like my first proper queen's record? I think it's important that I can be out there and say that I'm a big tart and still have a big smash album."

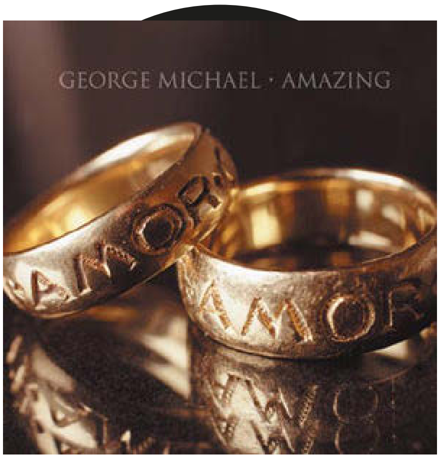
> *Shoot The Dog* faced a barrage of hostility. As George told Trevor McDonald ahead of release, "I'm not stupid – I knew I was going to walk into a wall of criticism. These are very reactionary times, but they're also very urgent times and I felt that I had to do this"

37

THIS IS NOT REAL LOVE
RECORD LABEL **SONY BMG**
RELEASED **2006**

One of two new tracks, alongside the first release *An Easier Affair*, recorded for *Twenty Five* – this time highlighting Wham! hits alongside his own – *This Is Not Real Love* saw him teaming up with ex-Sugababe Mutya Buena. The single reached No.15 in November 2006. Mutya appeared on stage with George at one of the Earls Court shows as part of his 25 Live dates. Mutya said, "Starting off again as a soloist and working with George Michael was a pleasing moment. I'm not sure if it was crazy but it was special."

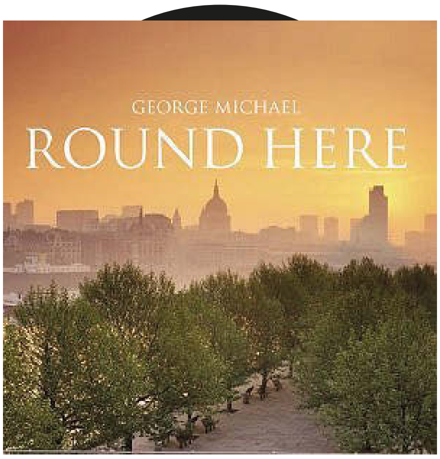
Amazing was dedicated to Kenny Goss, with whom George was in a relationship from 1998 until 2011. "It is remarkably unusual to hear me singing something so lovey-dovey. Normally, I am better at writing about misery… the great thing is that I still feel the undying love"



34

AMAZING
RECORD LABEL **SONY**
RELEASED **2004**

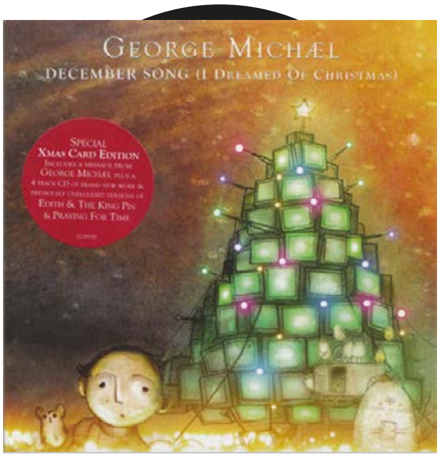
Amazing was dedicated to Kenny Goss, with whom George was in a relationship from 1998 until 2011. Speaking at the time, George said "It is remarkably unusual to hear me singing something so lovey-dovey. Normally, I am better at writing about misery… the great thing is that I still feel the undying love." The song hit No.4 in the UK, was a big hit across Europe and No.1 in the US club charts. "*Amazing* reminds me of Wham! more than anything I've done."



35

ROUND HERE
RECORD LABEL **SONY**
RELEASED **2004**

Round Here was a song about George's childhood in Kingsbury Park, Hertfordshire, his birth and first day at school, reflecting on how his parents first got together, and how Wham! was formed to the music of The Specials, The Jam and ABC "falling like rain to the streets… when all that I wanted was to be someone". The song has a special place in his follower's hearts, and places mentioned in the lyrics are visited as part of a 'Round Here Walk' for various charities.



38

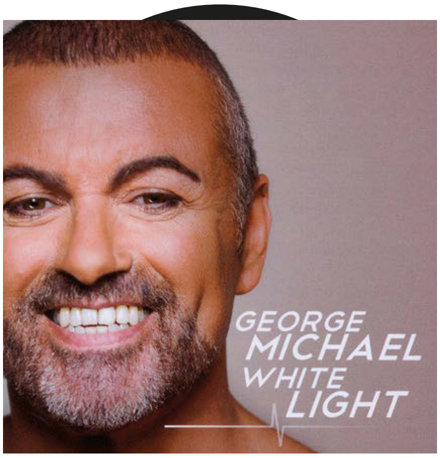
DECEMBER SONG (I DREAMED OF CHRISTMAS)
RECORD LABEL **AEGEAN/ISLAND**
RELEASED **2008**

On the last date of his 25 Live tour, George announced that *December Song* would be available for free from his website over Christmas 2008. The song was properly released the following year as part of an EP. This reflection on Christmas past was written with the Spice Girls in mind – and then Michael Bublé – but George decided to keep it for himself. It could have got higher than No.14 had enough copies been available after his performance on *The X Factor*.

39

TRUE FAITH
RECORD LABEL **AEGEAN/BBC**
RELEASED **2011**

George struggled with Twitter in the days before it became a binfire, even prompting some tips from Rachel Roberts in *The Guardian*. When it was announced that he had covered New Order's *True Faith* for Comic Relief, the singer was very pro-active tweet-wise urging fans to buy it (though many found the song slightly odd). George stole the show when he appeared with James Corden in a short film where the two of them had to 'save Comic Relief', a sketch which inspired Corden's Carpool Karaoke concept.



40

WHITE LIGHT
RECORD LABEL **AEGEAN/ISLAND**
RELEASED **2012**

Released on the 30th anniversary of his first hit, *White Light* is probably best known as the song he performed after *Freedom '90* at the 2012 Olympics closing ceremony. Responding to criticism that he used the event to plug his new material, George said: "It was my one chance on TV to thank you all for your loyalty and prayers, and I took it. And I don't regret it." The promo starred Kate Moss; "I wasn't in the *Freedom* video – I just missed it," she said around the time. "That would have been amazing."

HANDS OF FATE

GEORGE MICHAEL ENTERED THE NEW MILLENNIUM WITH *SONGS FROM THE LAST CENTURY* RIDING HIGH IN THE CHART, FREE OF A RECORDING CONTRACT AND HEADING FOR A PERIOD OF BREAK-UPS, CONTROVERSY, TELEVISION FUN AND A RETURN TO THE BIGGEST STAGES ON THE PLANET

IAN WADE

As the year 2000 began, and seeing as the planet wasn't wiped out by the millennium bug after all, George resumed business when he recorded a duet with Whitney Houston that March. *If I Told You That* had already appeared on Whitney's album *My Love Is Your Love* in 1998, but added George's vocal to a slightly rejigged version after the original plan of featuring Michael Jackson fell through. Co-produced by Rodney Jerkins, it was the second single the following August from her *Greatest Hits* collection.

By now, George was directing a large proportion of his personal energies into causes that mattered deeply to him – both on a professional level, and a personal one. In June, he made an appearance at the Pavarotti & Friends for Cambodia and Tibet concert alongside such turns such as Eurythmics, Tracy Chapman and Skunk Anansie. In October he outbid rivals – allegedly including Robbie Williams and Noel Gallagher – when he bought John Lennon's piano, the one he'd written *Imagine* on, no less, at an auction of the late Beatle's effects, for £1.45m. His plan was to return it to The Beatles Story museum in Liverpool, where it had previously just been on loan. Much closer to home, George made sure he was there for his friend Geri Halliwell, who was having a traumatic post-Spice Girls solo wobble. Geri Halliwell stayed at his house in Los Angeles in 2000; she later admitted that at the height of her eating disorder, she'd taken to rummaging through George's bins for food.

But what of George's own career? By the end of 2001, there were hints that something was finally afoot when he signed a deal with Universal. Though many labels were bidding to snap him up, his agreement with Polydor/Universal was, it transpired, more of a trial run. If the next couple of singles were a success, then he'd let them release the album.

Launched in March 2002 and accompanied by a fruity video which was premiered late at night on Channel 4, *Freeek!* was George's first self-penned single since *Outside*. With the singer keen to flip 180 degrees on the easy-listening style of *Songs From The Last Century*, it was a far more 21st century-flavoured effort featuring samples from Aaliyah, Kool & The Gang, and Q-Tip. Though it was expected to duke it out for the top spot in the UK charts with *Pop Idol*'s Gareth Gates' first single, it merely reached No.7.

In June, it was announced that the follow-up, a song called *Shoot The Dog* – a state-of-the-nation address based around a sample from The Human League's *Love Action (I Believe In Love)* – would be released that August. George put out a statement to explain the song and the video, and appeared on the BBC TV interview programme *Hardtalk* to discuss the Middle East crisis and further defend the single. In 2003, on *Breakfast With Frost*, he warned that war against Iraq could "light the touch paper" of Islamic fundamentalism.

George riding an Iraqi missile bound for Tony and Cherie Blair's bedroom in the satirical video for *Shoot The Dog*, created by the British TV series *2DTV*

George in the cyborg fantasy that was shot to promote 2002's *Freeek!*, directed by Joseph Kahn, the man behind Janet Jackson's $2.5 million video for *It Doesn't Really Matter*

© Photoshot

© Ken McKay/REX/Shutterstock

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George and Kenny Goss at the Versace Couture launch party thrown by Donatella Versace at the Ritz in Paris in 2002

At the 2003 Brit Awards, George – appearing only on screen – performed a reworked version of *Faith* with rising star Ms Dynamite, and ended the month with an appearance on *The Graham Norton Show*, where he sang Don McLean's composition *The Grave* in protest against the looming Iraq war. He also delivered the song on *Top Of The Pops* – his first appearance on the show in 17 years. The Beeb banned him from wearing a "No war, Blair out" T-shirt. McLean himself simply said, "I am proud of George Michael for standing up for life and sanity."

AT LONG LAST

After submerging himself for the rest of the year in finishing his next album, the announcement that George had re-signed with Sony for the worldwide release of *Patience* came in November. The decision, the star said, "had everything to do with [Tommy] Mottola leaving. I never had any problem with Sony in the UK, but America holds the purse strings. If you fall out with the boss, you're in trouble."

As 2004 began, *Amazing* was released just ahead of the album in March. It became a hit across Europe and entered the top five in the UK. George also contributed to a three-part BBC Radio 2 documentary, *The George Michael Story,* broadcast across the month. Now well and truly on the promotional trail, he put in appearances on Michael Parkinson's chat show and turned up on *Oprah* in the US. He also, rather dramatically, declared he was going to retire, saying he would stop releasing CDs after *Patience*, instead launching his songs online for free.

Patience enjoyed highly gratifying first-week sales of over 275,000 copies in its first week and hit the top five across the world in most countries bar Japan. On the Billboard list it made a muted No.12, but still sold over 381,000 copies, earning a gold certification.

POP_UP In 2004 George was revealed to be the most-played artist of the preceding 20 years on British radio, beating even established galactic stars Elton John and Paul McCartney to the top spot

"THE SOAP OPERA LAUNCHED FROM THAT STATEMENT ELTON MADE. BUT HE HADN'T SEEN ME FOR YEARS"

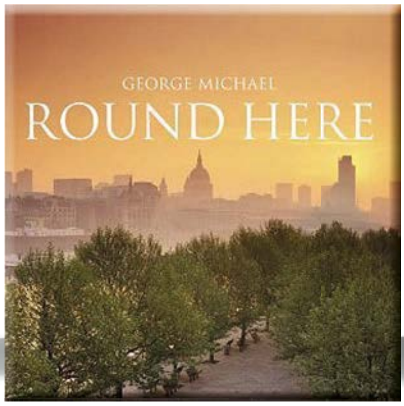
GEORGE MICHAEL

Keen to reaffirm his relationship with his gay fans, George chose his next single to be a reworking of *Flawless* by the New York-based trio The Ones, who'd taken it to the Top 10 a few years previously. Produced by A Touch Of Class, who'd worked with Scissor Sisters on a couple of numbers, *Flawless* was a dancefloor monster that seemed to connect the strands of early Noughties New York nightlife perfectly, touching on the voguers, elements of electroclash and high fashion. The single entered the UK charts at No.8 and became his biggest hit on the dance lists in the US to date, topping Billboard's Hot Dance Club and Dance/Electronic sales lists.

In November, George had to deal with upsetting issues when a female intruder broke into his London address. While George didn't want to press charges, when she was found to be lurking near his house

Far left: George won hearts with a candid and revealing *Parkinson* interview in 2007 while awaiting his day in court for driving while unfit. In the end, he was given 100 hours of community service

© Photo 12 / Alamy Stock Photo



again later the same day, she was cautioned for harassment. "The only reason they eventually took her to the police station was because she punched one of them," he informed *GQ* magazine. It wasn't the first time he'd suffered a disturbing invasion of privacy: the previous year, it was revealed, someone had actually lived under his floorboards for four days.

When *Round Here* was released as a single from *Patience*, it charted at No.36, one of his lowest positions in the UK. To coincide with *Round Here,* the documentary *A Different Story* was broadcast on BBC1. A candid behind-the-scenes look at the artist's operation, it featured George setting the record straight on a number of issues, plus contributions from Elton John, Mariah Carey, Sting and Noel Gallagher, as well as a reunion with Andrew Ridgeley.

More trouble reared its head when Elton was interviewed by *Heat* magazine in December, suggesting that all was not well with George and that he should "get out more". "George is in a strange place," Elton surmised. "There appears to be a deep-rooted unhappiness in his life."

Firing off a furious letter to the editor within days of publication, George struck back. "I think that it's time to set the record straight about my friendship with Sir Elton John and how he may have come to such negative conclusions about my life," he snapped. "Elton John knows very little about George Michael, and that's a fact. And much as I am saddened that he would feel the need to criticise my album (which is, of course, in my humble opinion, a classic!), I am far more surprised that Elton seems to have forgotten me calling him a few months back to tell him that my American royalties from *Patience* would be donated entirely to the Elton John AIDS Foundation." Ouch.

In a 2006 interview with Michael Parkinson, George reflected that the harsh media treatment of his personal life really began when Elton made those adverse comments about his state of mind. "The trajectory of my particular soap opera launched

AND THE SATELLITE SAYS

GEORGE ON THE BOX

George – who was legendary for his enthusiastic consumption of soaps such as *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* – certainly liked his telly. During this decade he popped up, often unannounced, as a guest star, as well as turning up to defend himself on random chat shows and news programmes.

In 2000 he made himself known as a fan of *Big Brother*, and much enjoyed its debut series in the UK. After a conversation had been broadcast on the subject of homosexuality, with the housemates shouting down the 'Nasty Nick' contestant over his views about George's 'outing', the singer sent a message to the show. "Whether you know it or not, your opinions have become important," he said. "To say thank you, for your kind words last night, please let me buy you all a drink when they let you out on parole… but preferably on a night when Nick is completely unavailable."

In 2003 George made an appearance on a celebrity version of *Who Wants to Be A Millionaire* teamed with Ronan Keating, who had shared the pain of losing his mother to cancer. They raised £32,000 for cancer charities in the shows that were broadcast over the Christmas period.

George's skits with David Walliams and Matt Lucas in various *Little Britain* guises are the highlight of 2005's Comic Relief night. "We filmed it in front of an audience and didn't tell them," Walliams recalled. "When I opened the door and George walked through, there was a stunned silence. It was a hoot."

George's sideline in sending himself up got a further boost as 2007 moved into 2008 when he featured in *The Catherine Tate Show*, Ricky Gervais' *Extras* and the US legal comedy drama *Eli Stone*. The ABC series premiered at the end of January 2008, and follows Stone, played by Jonny Lee Miller, a San Francisco lawyer who begins to have hallucinations of, among many other things, George Michael, with a soundtrack that only he can hear.

Each episode in the first series was named after a George or Wham! song, and George himself popped up throughout the series with musical numbers including *Amazing* and *Older*. During the final episode, where Stone has an operation to remove the brain aneurysm which was causing all the hallucinations in the first place, he meets God, who bears an uncanny resemblance to George, and is serenaded by him and the cast on a version of *Feeling Good*.

Finally, and perhaps most bizarrely, George featured in an *EastEnders* storyline in 2009, where his biggest fan Heather Trott, accompanied by her mate Shirley Carter, break into George's garden, spots someone inside and takes a photo. However while this is going on, Shirley – who is on lookout duty – realises they have the wrong house but declines to ruin Heather's happiness. Heather then seeks solace in a yoghurt pot lid that she retrieved from what she thought was George's bin, hoping it will become a lucky talisman for her and help her meet the man of her dreams. Barmy.

from that statement Elton made about 18 months ago when Elton hadn't seen me for years," he sighed.

As his *A Different Story* film debuted at the Berlin International Film Festival, George told reporters that he wanted to "move his career into a different form", while adding that he didn't yet know what that form was going to be. He also revealed that under his contract with Sony Music, he was required to record two duets before regaining his artistic freedom.

HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

In July, George joined Paul McCartney to sing *Drive My Car* during the ex-Beatle's headline set in Hyde Park for Live 8, the show put together by Bob Geldof in support of the Make Poverty History campaign. The London leg of the world-straddling event had already witnessed U2, Coldplay, REM, Elton (accompanied, bewilderingly, by Pete Doherty), Madonna, The Who and a reformed Pink Floyd prior to McCartney's set.

The original plan had been for George to sing a song solo at some point. "Well, to be honest with you, I did actually want to do a song of my own," he affirmed to Jo Whiley on the day. "I was going to do *Praying For Time* just with a piano. It would have been nice, because the lyric would have worked… but I have a head cold." He also went on to reveal that he and Paul were "doing some recording later this week… we're gonna do a version of one of my old songs called *Heal The Pain*, which I wrote as a tribute to him, and so I'm incredibly honoured that he's gonna sing it for me. Yeah, we're friends. We've been speaking for a while."

Just as everyone had thought *Patience* had run its course, George released a digital EP of *John And Elvis Are Dead*. Its format as a five-track EP meant it was ineligible for the chart and downloads wouldn't

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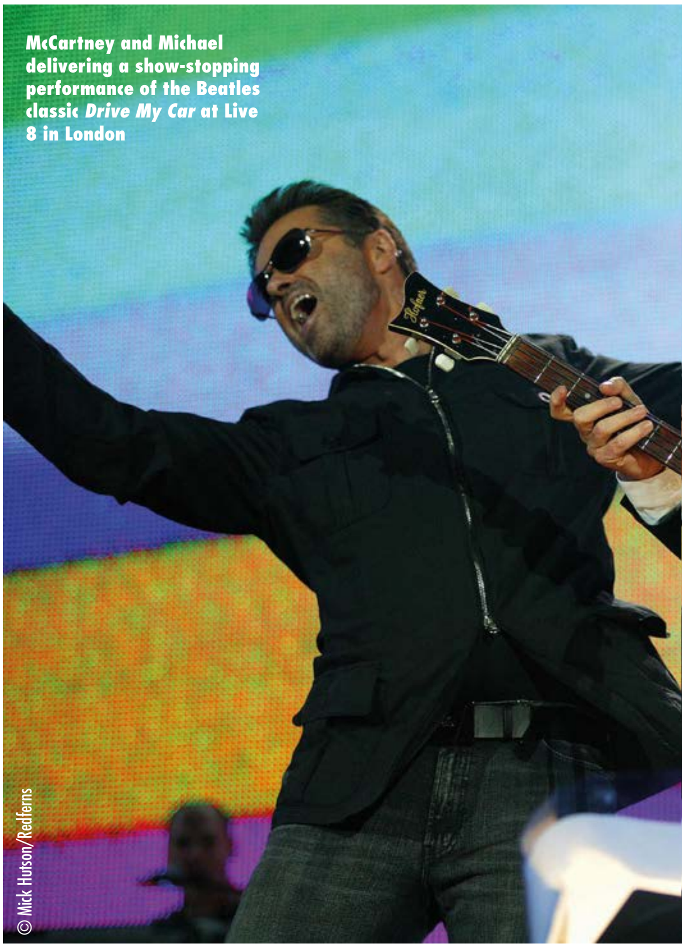


McCartney and Michael delivering a show-stopping performance of the Beatles classic *Drive My Car* at Live 8 in London

© Mick Hutson/Redferns

be counted by themselves for another few months, but the EP did quite well on the iTunes lists instead. Meanwhile, in September, a duet between George Michael and R&B legend Ray Charles, a version of Stevie Wonder's *Blame It On The Sun*, appeared on Charles' album of duets, *Genius And Friends*.

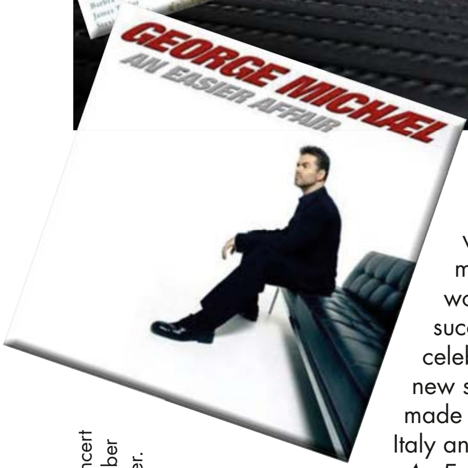
WILD SIDE OF LIFE

The year 2006 began rather inauspiciously for George when he was arrested after being found slumped asleep at the wheel of his car in central London. He was taken into custody at Hyde Park Corner on suspicion of possessing drugs, and eventually received a police caution for possessing marijuana, and attended Belgravia police station to receive a formal caution. The second drug, which was initially thought to be liquid ecstasy, was in fact legal poppers. He would also be questioned about an incident involving his Range Rover that April.

On a more cheerful note, Michael announced his first tour for 15 years – *25 Live*, a celebration of his 25 years in music since Wham! first charted. The 50 dates kicked off in Madrid that September, ending

6 POP_UP George was the first artist to perform at the new Wembley Stadium in 2007. Unfortunate support act Sophie Ellis-Bextor was elbowed aside so George could claim the title, and he was later fined £130,000 for overrunning by 13 minutes

George opening his first US tour in 17 years with a two-hour show at the San Diego Sports Arena on June 17, 2008



with five nights at London's Wembley Arena in December. It was an instant sell-out, breaking many venues' ticketing records, and would become the most commercially successful tour in Europe 2006-7. To celebrate, George released a brand-new single, *An Easier Affair*, which made a muted No.13 in the UK, though Italy and Hungary elevated it to No.1.

An Easier Affair would be one of three new tracks featured on *Twenty Five* that October, along with his duets with Mutya Buena on *This Is Not Real Love* and the new version of *Heal The Pain* with Paul McCartney. The two-disc set was divided into 'For Living' and 'For Loving' themes, and focused on a mix of album tracks and hits. It also saw the inclusion of a handful of Wham! tunes – *Everything She Wants*, *Freedom*, *Last Christmas* and *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go*. Wham!'s *If You Were There* appeared on the limited third disc entitled 'For The Loyal' alongside another new solo song, *Understand*. *Twenty Five* would mark the end of the contract with Sony; George was now a free agent once again.

George also featured on another star-packed album, this time Tony Bennett's rattle through the American songbook, *Duets: An American Classic*, singing on *How Do You Keep The Music Playing?*

At the end of October, a *South Bank Show* special was broadcast, which followed him preparing for his 25 Live tour. Due to high demand for tickets, further dates were announced across Europe for the summer, starting in Portugal in May and ending in Belfast in August. The tour also included two dates at London's newly-rebuilt Wembley Stadium.

In October, George appeared on BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* programme, and talked candidly to Kirsty Young about how he had regained his emotional and professional confidence and how he had always struggled with guilt. "I've spent much of the last 15 years trying to derail my own career, because it never seems to suffer," he reflected, "but I *do* suffer." His selections were Roxy Music's *Do The Strand*, Gnarls Barkley's *Crazy*, *Smells Like Teen Spirit* by Nirvana, *Being Boring* by Pet Shop Boys, *Paper Bag* by Goldfrapp, Kanye West's *Gold Digger*, and Rufus Wainwright's *Going To A Town*. The song he would save from the waves, he confessed, was Amy Winehouse's *Love Is A Losing Game*. He chose "any book of short stories by Doris Lessing" as his preferred book alongside the Bible and Shakespeare, and an Aston Martin DB9 as his luxury item.

POP_UP George played a special secret free concert at London's Roundhouse for NHS nurses in December 2006, to thank those who had cared for his mother. The venue, he told the audience, was "full of heroes"

> "I'VE SPENT THE LAST 15 YEARS TRYING TO DERAIL MY CAREER, BECAUSE IT NEVER SEEMS TO SUFFER. BUT I *DO* SUFFER"
>
> GEORGE MICHAEL

© Kevin Winter/Getty Images

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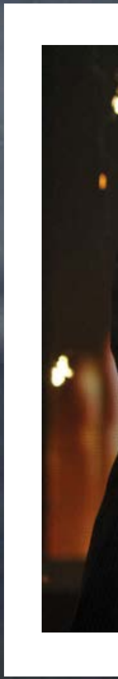
George emerging relieved from Brent Magistrates Court after pleading guilty to a charge of driving while unfit through drugs on May 8, 2007

George performs a solo rendition of *December Song* at the final of *The X Factor* – a performance which, if not for a record company miscalculation, could have resulted in a Christmas No.1

"NORMALLY, I AM BETTER AT WRITING ABOUT MISERY. THE GREAT THING IS THAT I STILL FEEL THE UNDYING LOVE"

GEORGE MICHAEL

© Ken McKay/TalkbackThames/REX/Shutterstock



A third leg of the tour was announced for North America in 2008, with 21 dates across the US and Canada, his first tour there in 17 years. There were two more London dates, dubbed The Final Two, at London's Earl's Court in August. A couple of weeks after that, he was arrested again in a north London gents in possession of drugs believed to be crack cocaine and cannabis, but this time he was released with no further action taken. He ended the year with a free download on his site of *December Song (I Dreamed Of Christmas)*, available for Christmas and Boxing Day. It would get a wider release the following year.

The decade concluded with a relatively quiet year for George – at least in the public eye. He had postponed much of his schedule after his partner Kenny walked out on him around Christmas. Together they would remain business partners in their art gallery in Dallas, but whatever rumours swirled around the press over the year and whatever happened behind closed doors, George still managed to pop up unannounced to duet with Beyoncé at the O2 in June. In August it was officially confirmed that the 13-year relationship between George and Kenny was over.

Further distress came when George was involved in an accident in August after he'd allegedly driven his car at high speed into a lorry on the A34 near Newbury, Berkshire at 1am (he'd only just got his licence back after a two-year driving suspension). Speaking to Simon Hattenstone in *The Guardian* a few months later, George claimed "If that juggernaut had killed me, I think I'd be perfectly happy with the amount of quality music I have left in the world. My ego is sated."

As a busy decade – if not perhaps as tumultuous as previous ones – ended, George popped up on *The X Factor* final to perform *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* with eventual winner Joe McElderry, and also *December Song (I Dreamed Of Christmas)*. Most guests on *The X Factor* saw a massive upswing in their sales after a slot on the show, and in the case of *December Song,* physical copies sold out the next day, forcing the record company – who had released the track in collaboration with Island – to press up more. Unfortunately, by the time fresh stock reached the shops, the Christmas chart had been announced, so the song only reached No.14. ■

THE KEY RECORDINGS

GLOBAL POLITICS, THE REDEMPTION OF LOVE, ESCAPING TO THE CITY AND A BITTERSWEET WINTER TALE

SHOOT THE DOG

2002

A controversial release, with George sending himself up in a crude cartoon vision while taking aim at Bush and Blair's 'special relationship' with cameos for the Queen, Geri Halliwell and Philip Oakey's iconic lopsided haircut (a reference to the sample of the Human League's *Love Action* used in the song). It showcased George's ability to still get up people's noses, especially so with his American audience, who frankly didn't seem to want to have much to do with George after 1998's restroom arrest, and were easily appalled by literally anything (though George was compelled to apologise regardless). Bizarrely, the video was shown in tribute on ITV the day after his death rather than any of his 10 chart-toppers.

AMAZING

2004

A love song for his long-suffering fella Kenny Goss, *Amazing* also reminded George of when he used to go out dancing in the soul clubs of Harrow and Watford during his pre-Wham! days. He seems finally at ease at singing about another man on this breezin' pop stormer, and it served notice of the arrival of *Patience* – and better summed up the album than *Shoot The Dog* or *Freeek!* did – when released a fortnight beforehand in March 2004. "Normally, I am better at writing about misery," George allowed. "I think it's a great song for two people falling in love. The great thing is that I still feel the undying love. That was why it was easy for me to finish it with the same energy I started with."

FLAWLESS (GO TO THE CITY)

2004

Unconvinced he'd already delivered a gay anthem with *Outside*, George took The Ones' *Flawless* and, well, made it gayer. "When I was trying to decide whether to use that track or not, one night I arranged to meet this guy," he told *Attitude* in 2004. "I told him who I was but I don't think he really believed me. The truth of the matter is nothing happened, because this guy was so freaked out because he was a massive fan and just within two minutes of chatting to him about this and that, I asked him about music. He was talking about late Seventies funk and all the stuff I like, and then he said 'but I love that *Flawless* track that came out last year'. And I thought 'Ah, someone is trying to tell me something…'"

DECEMBER SONG (I DREAMED OF CHRISTMAS)

1998

Built around a Frank Sinatra sample and co-written with his longtime collaborator David Austin, *December Song* had originally been earmarked for the Spice Girls or possibly Michael Bublé, but was kept by George instead and given as a "gift" to his fans in 2008. A year later it was released as a single to coincide with his appearance on *The X Factor*. A melancholy gem about "watching TV all day", it chimed far more realistically with his fans than the likelihood of a snow-filled yule. Just as *Last Christmas* has proven, thanks to downloads, to be a festive chart evergreen, we're predicting that *December Song* will become a seasonal classic.

CLASSIC

ALBUM

PATIENCE

GEORGE WAS BACK AFTER AN EIGHT-YEAR HIATUS, AND HIS FIFTH SOLO ALBUM PRESENTED TWO FACES – PULSATING DISCO INTERSPERSED WITH SOPHISTICATED, SUBLIMELY-WRITTEN BALLADS

IAN WADE

Recorded in sessions held over a number of years, *Patience* certainly tested that quality amongst the fans, arriving the best part of a decade after George's last 'proper' album, *Older*. With no record company breathing down his neck, he was able to proceed at his own pace without A&R interference.

"There's no budget working with George Michael," David Austin recalled. "*Patience* took us, what, six years? Most people you know, do four weeks in the studio these days, and mix it in seven days, so certainly you've got the luxury in that." Maybe it risked becoming bogged down, as Austin later mused on RTE's *The Gerry Ryan Show* in 2009: "I think we were about a year and a half in, and I don't know, the record really sounded kind of cooked to me. But then it just kind of took a turn."

This concurs with the recollection of mastering engineer Tony Cousins – who, as one of the founders of Metropolis Mastering, had worked on George's music since *Careless Whisper*. George, he told PSN Europe magazine, was "a perfectionist in the recording studio, which meant that there was rarely a great deal to do when it came to mastering. He had a deep understanding of production and studio processes… and he was fascinated by it all. The tapes that arrived were meticulous and really required very little work. That's not to say that I wasn't making changes here and there, but they were relatively minor – and that's a testament to his fastidiousness."

The album was mostly George originals, with the credits allowing for samples and reinterpretations, though he reunited with Johnny Douglas, who'd penned *Spinning The Wheel*, on co-written tracks *Amazing* and *Cars And Trains*. George would also share writing and production credits with Niall Flynn, James Jackman and Ruadhri Cushnan on *Freeek! 04* and *American Angel*. He credited Douglas, Flynn and Jackman as 'The A Team', saying "Believe me, if any one knows the meaning of patience, it's these guys. This record has taken five long years, and each of us has had to deal with bereavement during that time."

The title track was composed and recorded with John Lennon's piano, a Steinway Z1 upright used on *Imagine*, which George bought for £1.6 million to allow it to be displayed to the Beatles-loving public ("it's not the type of thing that should be in storage somewhere or being protected, it should be seen by people," he said).

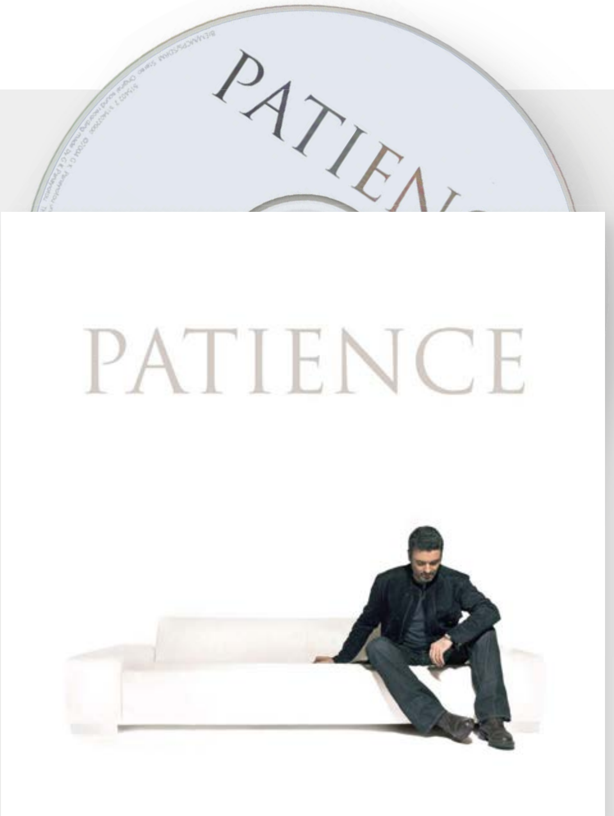
Co-written with David Austin, *John And Elvis Are Dead* was Austin playing to their strengths, as he told the *Daily Mail*: "I know what inspires George musically, especially with ballads. The right chord change can be a platform for him to take off. You can't manufacture that sort of relationship." George said that the song was "written for a generation before mine. Something that most people don't notice about my career is that I have the career principles of a Seventies rock star. The kind of principles everyone has given up now."

Round Here, he expanded, was "a very universal idea of the fact that you are going to live in roughly the same area your whole life. For some people, that is a choice. For others, it is not. I've been around the world many times, yet most of my life has been concentrated around a five-mile radius. My mother was born a quarter of a mile from where I have an office. I have such affection for my hometown and memories that I live where I do."

Flawless (Go To The City) saw George take the original by The Ones and basically sing over the top of it. "I wanted to camp it up a bit more as so many people I know loved that record," he told *Attitude* magazine in 2004. Meanwhile, *Precious Box* was George having a rail at reality TV culture: "The song is about the fact that ordinary people now see very ordinary people becoming wealthy and famous. It's creating a kind of hysteria."

TRACKLISTING

Patience
Amazing
John And Elvis Are Dead
Cars And Trains
Round Here
Shoot The Dog
My Mother Had A Brother
Flawless (Go To The City)
American Angel
Precious Box
Please Send Me Someone (Anselmo's Song)
Freeek! '04
Through
Patience (Pt. 2)



THE PLAYERS

RELEASED 18 March 2004

LABEL Aegean / Sony / Epic

PRODUCED BY George Michael, with Johnny Douglas on tracks 4 & 11 and James Jackman, Niall Flynn, Ruadhri Cushnan and Johnny Douglas on 9 & 12

ENGINEER Niall Flynn with Adam Noble, Andy Davies

RECORDED AT AIR Studios, London

MASTERED AT Metropolis, London and Sterling Sound, NYC

PERSONNEL
George Michael – vocals, bass, piano, programming, guitar, keyboards; David Austin, James Jackman, Johnny Douglas, Ruadhri Cushnan, Pete Gleadall – keys; Chris Cameron – piano; Jo Bryant – backing vocals; Phil Palmer – guitar; drum programming – George Michael, Johnny Douglas; orchestration – David Arnold; Luke Smith – Wurlitzer; Graham Silbiger – bass; Hippy – panting on 6

Of the heartbreaking *My Mother Had A Brother*, George said: "The lyrics are about my uncle, who died suddenly and tragically, on the day that I was born. There's a mention of suicide and fear and a burden of hidden homosexuality. The number of people who walk around in life never being themselves… being afraid of themselves, disagreeing with their internal reflection and suffering internal, physical heartache because they are well and truly closeted."

With orchestration added by James Bond composer David Arnold, almost-closer *Through* was almost George's farewell. There's a nod to 007 with the use of *Moonraker* in *Please Send Me Someone To Love (Anselmo's Song)*.

Patience was announced at the end of 2003, tying in with the news that George had re-signed with Sony for the album. While not performing spectacularly well in the charts, in comparison to his own high bar of sales set by *Faith*, *Patience* still did very decent business, gaining one of the UK's biggest-ever first-week figures for an album by shifting 275,000 copies. It sold over a million across Europe and managed as well as could be expected over in America, reaching No.12. ■

THE BIG PICTURE

THE VIDEOS

FREEEK!

DIRECTOR: JOSEPH KAHN

The futuristic *Freeek!* had a theme not unlike that of a more sexually-aggressive *Blade Runner*, with George as a sci-fi perv in a variety of cyborg get-ups. *TOTP* and *Pop Idol* got told off for showing bits of the vid before 9pm, but despite the hubbub the single didn't stick around long. **youtu.be/VLnYPXTs9LY**

SHOOT THE DOG

DIRECTOR: 2DTV

2DTV's broad satire sees George lampooning various eras of his career and taking potshots at the transatlantic "special relationship". The promo is swiftly banned and causes much uproar, especially in America where – hilariously – it was never released at the time. **youtu.be/ABhZQ_VRbsQ**

AMAZING

DIRECTOR: MATTHEW ROLSTON

Amazing's video shows a holographic performance by George projected in front of a long lounge, while the audience – also containing the singer – groove along to it. Here's hoping it's not given any hologram makers any foolish ideas to "resurrect" George in the future. **youtu.be/6YziZ1FlAWs**

FLAWLESS (GO TO THE CITY)

DIRECTOR: GEORGE MICHAEL & ANDREW TROVAIOLI

Co-directed by George, this opens with a man having a loud wee in a hotel room. He's joined by George and a host of dancers in various states of undress. To close, George turns the lights off and leaves the room. **youtu.be/QgGDcn46aW8**

ROUND HERE

DIRECTOR: ANDY MORAHAN

Round Here features George recording the song in the studio. Images such as George's childhood home and school, plus general 'London back in the past' footage of tube stations, Chinatown and run-down high streets help illustrate the words and the nostalgic references he makes. **youtu.be/GmTvfml31AI**

JOHN AND ELVIS ARE DEAD

DIRECTOR: ANTHEA BENTON

John And Elvis Are Dead was accompanied by what many believe to be one of George's best videos. Featuring images of Nelson Mandela, Freddie Mercury, Marvin Gaye and Diana, Princess of Wales, it was also noticeable for its religious imagery. **youtu.be/c-GvAbPsarw**

2010s

UNFINISHED SYMPHONY

A MUSICAL GAMBLE OF SPECTACULAR GRANDEUR, A SUMPTUOUS ALBUM, A SERIES OF WAKE-UP CALLS AND MISADVENTURES, HINTS OF NEW WORK TO COME, AND FINALLY – AND SHOCKINGLY – A CONCLUSION THAT NONE OF US YET UNDERSTAND

RIK FLYNN

The new decade would summon tragedy. First Bowie, then Prince… and on Christmas Day 2016, spirits were cruelly dimmed once more as news channels broke the story that George Michael was dead at just 53 years of age. No doubt utterly shellshocked, his family spoke only to confirm that he had passed away peacefully at his home in Oxfordshire. Some later claimed to have seen it coming. In the time leading up to his death, George had all but withdrawn from public life, preferring to remain a recluse in his Goring mansion than to return to London life and the ever-intrusive eyes of the press. On Christmas Eve he'd quietly watched as the yearly candlelit parade had passed by his window, and that was likely the last anyone saw of him alive.

His body was discovered in bed by boyfriend Fadi Fawaz on Christmas morning. By February, Fadi's frantic 999 call had somehow been leaked to the press; this was an example of the level of the cold-blooded intrusion into George Michael's life and, as was immediately clear, it wouldn't stop there. There would be no peace for the star, even after he'd passed on. But for all the headlines that targeted his sins, one last surprise would ensure George would ultimately be remembered as a saint.

He had not made it easy for himself. Between the beginning of 2010 and his passing, there had been a whole heap more trouble. George was involved in several nasty car accidents, he'd spent time behind bars, and he'd fought hard against – and, at times, succumbed to – his various addictions. On top of all that, he'd survived a seriously close brush with death that many put down to his lifestyle choices. Beyond the tribulations, however, the first half of this new decade revealed him to be a force of nature, offering up colossal vocal performances, putting in some seriously hard graft, and taking the biggest risk of his career thus far – one that ultimately paid off.

While the current decade would produce just one solitary album, it would be far more than just a collection of songs. *Symphonica* was a live project of epic proportions, a burst of creativity that brushed aside cheap swipes and character assassinations and focussed our view on a human being with a tremendous gift that – once more – vindicated him as a major figure in music. But it would be a while before this musical adieu took shape.

In February 2010, George and his 15-strong band brought the curtain down on a four-year, 114-date world tour with a return to Australia, his first dates on the continent since 1988. At three shows, George was on the form of his life with a greatest hits set that for *The Herald Sun* had "set the bar sky-high". At the last date in Melbourne, the 47,000-strong audience were left with their jaws on the floor. "If I'm a functioning drug addict," said George, not-so-subtly airing his contempt for the media, "I'm the best functioning drug addict you'll ever meet." Touché. With almost $15 million taken, the tour finale was clearly as lucrative as it was spectacular.

Facing the music: George arrives for his hearing at Highbury Magistrates' Court on August 24 2010, having admitted to driving under the influence. "It's so out of character for me to do something as irresponsible as that," he said. "It feels completely behind me"

© John Phillips/UK Press via Getty Images

© Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images

George, calm amidst the storm, leaving court knowing that in a few weeks he would be going to jail. Privately, he immediately entered rehab

As ever with George's tumultuous life, troughs immediately followed peaks, and his chequered relationship with automobiles continued in July 2010 when he was found slumped at the wheel of his Range Rover having left the road and careered into the Hampstead branch of Snappy Snaps. While amusing for some (one joker scribbled 'WHAM!' on the broken shopfront), George found himself facing a five-year driving ban and an eight-week prison sentence having pleaded guilty to possession of cannabis and driving under the influence. "The only thing that Mr Michael has specifically asked his lawyers to address to the court is his profound shame and horror of having repeated the conduct of 2006," his QC told the court.

Released after just four weeks, George expanded on his incarceration on Radio 2's *Up Close With George Michael* programme. "[Pentonville] was quite an horrific experience," he recalled. "I was put in with the paedophiles and the bullies, and I didn't leave my cell very much in those few days." He was clearly eager to wipe the slate clean. "From the moment that last crash happened," he continued, "it kind of shook me out of my denial in a way the others hadn't, probably because there was a chance I'd go to prison. So the day after that crash I started on drug counselling and I was two weeks in detox, none of which I made public… it's so out of character for me to do something as irresponsible as that, let alone repeatedly, and it feels completely behind me."

As well as a renewed desire to get clean, Michael's stint in prison was a creative catalyst. "It was a very strange thing," he told Chris Evans. "When I came out I wrote seven or eight songs in the period of about two and a half weeks, and that just never happens… and I was thinking to myself, 'Christ! I should have been locked up years ago, I would have come up with a couple of great albums by now!'" Close friend comedian Dawn French saw a new man: "I spoke to him when he got out of the clink and he sounded happier than ever and more sorted and enthused – and reborn a little bit. So maybe a little time in there was the best thing for him."

POP_UP While serving time in Pentonville, George received letters of support from fans and also messages from Elton John, Paul McCartney and Boy George, himself a former inmate at the prison

A SENSE OF LIBERTY

While the tabloids indulged in yet another feeding frenzy, George seemed more upset by the critics' reaction to his latest undertaking, a cover of New Order's late Eighties classic *True Faith*, released in March 2011 in support of Comic Relief. "I thought, why not just take a song that people would never expect to be interpreted in this way and actually show the pathos of that lyric, because it's amazing," said George of what he saw as a pertinent song "about the nature of addiction".

But unlike his stunning 1998 collaboration with Mary J Blige on Stevie Wonder's *As* (the takings of which he also gave to Comic Relief), *True Faith* was a distant cousin of the original. His voice hopelessly drowned in effects, it was not his finest hour – and the press quickly pounced. "Weirdly, it's not been done to enhance a high-octane, lose-your-mind-at-3am belter," opined *The Guardian*'s Michael Cragg of the record's usage of auto-tune. "It now sounds like it's being performed by a depressed Dalek." Ouch. "Thank you all, and f*** the journos who are trying to kill the record," came George's typically direct riposte on Twitter. The single made No.27.

On stage for the first night of his Australian tour at Burswood Dome on 20 February, 2010. The press hailed the three dates as "incredible", "joyous" and "extraordinary"
© Paul Kane/Getty Images

"FROM THE MOMENT THAT LAST CRASH HAPPENED, IT SHOOK ME OUT OF MY DENIAL THE WAY THE OTHERS HADN'T"
GEORGE MICHAEL

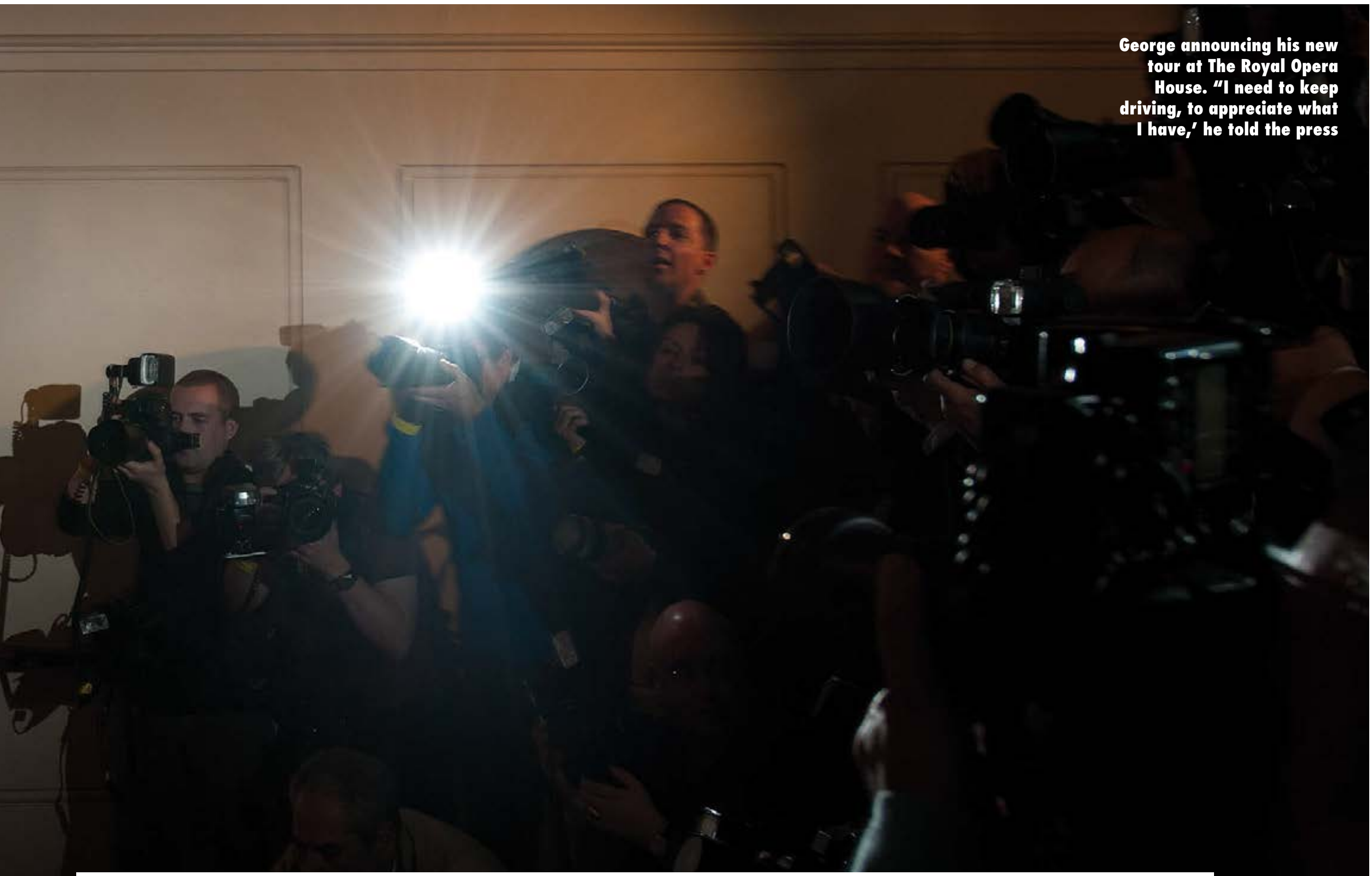
> “IN THE RUN UP TO *SYMPHONICA*, I GENUINELY WAS SCARED THAT PEOPLE WOULDN’T COME WITH ME THIS TIME”
>
> GEORGE MICHAEL

© Rune Hellestad/Corbis Caroline True/Getty Images

Yet another charitable dedication arrived in April when George offered up a second Stevie Wonder cover, *You And I*, as a wedding gift to Prince William and wife-to-be Kate Middleton. Fortunately leaving the auto-tune to one side, George issued the track as a free download, requesting fans make a contribution to the couple’s Charitable Gift Fund. “This is a genuine gift, not a promo exercise,” he clarified. “They’ll be able to turn it into many, many donations.” Even so, he had trouble clearing the track; “Those f***ers at EMI wanted to charge me for every download,” George tweeted angrily. Luckily Wonder stepped in and temporarily waived his royalties. The serenade went down well with the royal couple, so much so that it reportedly got an airing at their reception.

MAN AND ORCHESTRA

Before his 50th birthday, and in great shape, Michael wanted to make a bold return to the live circuit, claiming to be more motivated than he’d been since the beginning of Wham! – but this time, a genuinely pioneering leap into the unknown would leave little to hide behind. *Symphonica* was to be a record of an intimate yet spectacular tour of opera houses and arenas across Europe, with George accompanied by a 40-piece orchestra.



George announcing his new tour at The Royal Opera House. "I need to keep driving, to appreciate what I have,' he told the press

The "re-energised" singer told the world about the project on 11th May, 2011. Broadcaster Paul Gambaccini hosted the press conference at the Royal Opera House; "Think about it," Gambaccini later enthused. "There's a guy at peak. He's actually holding a press conference in the Royal Opera House. You can't get higher market than that." There, George explained that his inspiration to tour with an orchestra had come from Tony Bennett, and that he'd always wanted to do it in order to focus on his voice as opposed to the showmanship required for previous tours. The album he described as being "far more true to myself in terms of lyrical content, in terms of the music that I listen to now, having been an out gay man for the best part of 13 or 14 years."

George also dropped a teaser that between dates he would be recording new material, "which is about as far away from this *Symphonica* idea as could be imagined." Here were two distinctly separate projects that illustrated the two opposing sides to George's character. "I'm really not interested or excited by repeating former successes," he explained. "At this stage in life there are two elements that I feel can be explored further; one is dance music and one is the idea of my voice, and I think there's always been a very obvious love from my fans for both sides of what I do... musically, both things will be very different to what most people are expecting".

Symphonica was a grand prospect, but not an easy one to pull off. For one, no one had ever done pop concerts in opera houses before. For George, the tireless preparation clearly kept him on the straight and narrow. "I knew that one of the things that was going to keep me clean was singing in front of an orchestra," he told Radio 2's Vicki Wycombe. "To make the show really about my voice. I've never really been nervous about putting a tour together, but in the run up to the beginning of *Symphonica*, I genuinely was scared that maybe people wouldn't come with me this time."

George and manager David Austin visited producer Phil Ramone at Abbey Road. "We spoke to Phil about approaching some of the great arrangers, which we did, and we chose which tracks would go to who," explained Austin. "We decided we were going to record it, and George is such a perfectionist – it's not a case of going in and just doing it in the space of a week, these things take time. So I had this idea... that instead of him going into a studio and doing the vocals, we could take the vocals from each show."

Opening his set with a stirring rendition of *Through* from *Patience*, the set mixed tracks that George had never performed live (including new track *Where I Hope You Are*) with material from *Songs From The Last Century*, as well as songs from *Faith*, *Listen Without Prejudice*, *Older* and *Music From The Edge Of Heaven,* plus fresh covers of songs by artists such as Rufus Wainwright, Rhianna and Amy Winehouse.

With arrangements complete and renowned arranger and composer Steve Sidwell taking up the conductor's baton, Symphonica: The Orchestral Tour opened at Prague's stunning State Opera House, the first of 75 shows across 17 countries. Not since George's 2006 *MTV unplugged* performance had his voice been so exposed – and so incredible. "The first show was amazing," remembered tour photographer Caroline True. "700 people in the tiniest opera house in Prague – the most exquisite building." Amongst the more beautiful venues on the tour was the Arena di Verona, a 2000 year-old Roman amphitheatre, the Royal Albert Hall, the Royal Opera House, and the sumptuous late 19th century Palais Garnier opera

POP_UP In 2011, a game-for-a-laugh George Michael took part in the very first Carpool Karaoke, filmed for Comic Relief. Presenter James Cordon believes the skit was crucial in helping his career take off

A NIGHT AT THE OPERA

CROWNING CONCERT, ICONIC VENUE

It was surely one of his most prized performances and a truly cherished memory for all involved. On September 9 2012, George made history as the first contemporary artist to perform at the Palais Garnier opera house. Not only was it a crowning moment for the Symphonica tour, but the show incorporated a charity gala dinner to raise money for AIDS charity Sidaction. Paris' glitterati – including fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier, actress Berenice Bejo and Charlie Chaplin's grand-daughter Dolores Chaplin – arrived en masse to witness the event. The show was filmed, and the resulting *Live At The Palais Garnier Opera House In Paris* was screened on the BBC in September 2012. A selection of George's choice vocal performances appeared amidst interviews, while intimate behind-the-scenes moments included dozing crew members, rehearsal footage, famous faces in the lobby, champagne flutes, and a charming scene featuring vocal warm-ups with his backing singers.

George described first seeing the venue when he was about 21: "I remember driving up to this fantastic building and thinking, 'This is the most glorious piece of architecture I've ever seen', and then I noticed the word 'opera' above the building and I remember thinking, 'How amazing must that venue be on the inside!' And I never dreamed that I would get to sing on that stage. It took me 38 years to get there, but my God, was it worth the wait."

The pin-drop beauty of his rendition of *A Different Corner* induces shivers down the spine, while the singer's duality is clear for all to see in his typically self-effacing narration as he relays his friend's critique of the song: 'It's beautiful. Pathetic, but beautiful". Elsewhere, various stories of love triangles, studio moments with producer Phil Ramone and shots of an enraptured audience make for superb viewing.

© David Wolff - Patrick/Redferns via Getty Images

house in Paris. When a few free dates came up at the opulent 1,979-seat Garnier, it was a rare opportunity that George grasped with both hands. One of the world's most impressive theatres, its interior boasted marble, stucco, velvet and gilding and a magnificent eight-ton bronze and crystal chandelier hanging proudly overhead. George would be the first pop artist to perform there.

A CLOSE CALL

Opulent venues aside, all was clearly not well. Having cancelled one of his Royal Albert Hall shows in late October due to a 'viral infection', things were to get rapidly worse. As the tour reached Vienna, George was struck down with severe pneumonia and was rushed to hospital. The remainder of the tour was immediately cancelled. When he arrived at the hospital both of his lungs were almost completely depleted. His condition worsened and he slipped into a coma. It was "touch and go", as Austin vividly recalled. Luckily for George the hospital had the best respiratory unit in central Europe and, after a month in intensive care, he had survived. But only just.

Emerging severely shaken from his Highgate home, he choked back the tears. "I got steptococcha-something," he told the hastily-assembled media throng. "They spent three weeks keeping me alive, basically. I spent the last 10 days since I woke up literally thanking people for saving my life, which is something I've never had to do before and never want to do again." Later he would reveal to LBC radio's James O'Brien that doctors were concerned he had developed the rare 'Foreign Accent Syndrome'. On waking up from his coma, he had declared to nursing staff, "I'm king of the world!" in a West Country accent, before going on to entertain them with two days of Bristolian comedy routines.

Back in the UK for Christmas, George regained his strength before returning to the stage for the first time since his illness at the closing ceremony of the 2012 Summer Olympics. He performed *Freedom '90*, as well as debuting his dancefloor-friendly new single

White Light, inspired by his near-death experience. It was a move heavily criticised by some who saw it as shameless self-promotion, but George didn't care; his performance was well received and the rescheduled Symphonica tour dates were all ahead of him.

At his return show in Vienna he thanked the doctors that saved his life by donating 1000 free tickets to the hospital staff. "I left Vienna last year with some very painful memories," he declared, introducing a stirring rendition of *White Light*. "And I'll leave tonight with some amazing, amazing memories."

Three dates at London's Earl's Court served as a fitting denouement for what had been a joyous – albeit turbulent – tour. For George, the Royal Albert Hall was "probably the best performance as a vocalist I've given in my life."

And from those live performances came one powerful album – made with a legendary producer. "I knew I could never make *Symphonica* without Phil Ramone," George told the BBC. "It had been 12 years since we had made *Songs From The Last Century* together (or "Listen Without Purchasing" as he called it), so I knew he was a genius and I just had such fun with him... He understood more about music than anyone I had ever met, so I knew I could trust him completely with a tour as ambitious as this."

The album itself was made in tandem with the tour, some parts cut live, some laid down in the studio. Live recordings of George's vocals were shipped over to Ramone in New York, who then picked out his favourite takes to add to the string arrangements. The album was completed, but sadly it was to be Ramone's final engagement; at 79 years of age, the producer passed away on March 30, 2013. "It breaks my heart that he's not around to see this album released," said Michael. "What a great honour to be the last artist to have a piece of music released, that was produced by Phil Ramone."

Bizarre headlines followed in May 2013 when George was airlifted to hospital, this time having sustained a head injury falling from the passenger seat of his car on the M1 while travelling at speed.

© Jamie Squire/Getty Images

Above: George pictured performing his glorious and unforgettable Palais Garnier show in Paris in September 2012, and during the closing ceremony of the London Olympics

His injury was serious, evidenced by the five-inch scar on the back of his head.

Ignoring the inevitable tabloid conjecture, it was back to business when the album was presented to the press at Mayfair's Hamiltons Gallery in conjunction with an exhibition of Caroline True's tour photographs. *Symphonica* was finally released to the public on 14th March 2014, reaching No.1 in the charts immediately. The risk had paid off. For the critics, Michael's sixth album was a mixed bag. *The Guardian* called it "a slightly confused live album", *The Independent* found it "an engaging set" yet "essentially a souvenir", while Pop Matters dubbed it "a heady, luxurious soirée". In truth though, with beautifully re-purposed tracks such as *Through*, *Praying For Time*, *One More Try*, *A Different Corner* and some gorgeous covers such as *First Time Ever*

I Saw Your Face, and his delicate take on Terence Trent D'Arby's *Let Her Down Easy*, it was the perfect showcase for the one aspect of George the press could not ever attack – his voice.

THE SKY FALLS IN

Soon after the album's release, in May 2014, George was again rushed to hospital under mysterious circumstances. A statement said: "George was discharged last weekend and is well and resting. He is very much looking forward to the release of his new single in July. Given the personal nature of this matter there will be no further comment." The *Symphonica* single *Let Her Down Easy* managed No.53.

And then all went quiet. George had all but disappeared. When sighted in Zurich in 2015, reports surfaced that he was in rehab for drug addiction, claims denied by his PR. As ugly drug rumours and red-top tittle-tattle circulated, a tweet arrived shortly after his 52nd birthday: "To my lovelies and fans around the world, thank you for all the birthday wishes, I am truly overwhelmed. I am looking forward to spending it with friends and family. Thanks again, The Singing Greek."

At the time of his passing, George had almost finished his *Freedom* documentary. When aired by Channel 4 in October 2017, what had been intended to be an honest depiction of his story, directed and written by George himself, morphed into a deeply moving epitaph. George had finally found freedom from his demons and from the hounds that were endlessly on his tail. "In 1988 George Michael became the biggest-selling artist in the world," began his narration. "This is the story of how fame and tragedy intervened to change his life… forever."

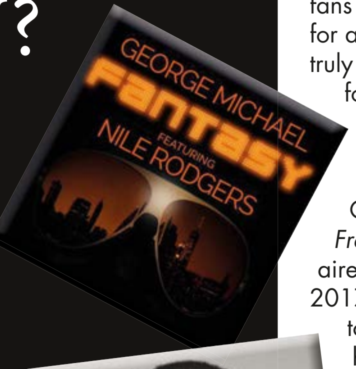
To add to the heartbreak, pictures circulated depicting George at a local restaurant shortly before his death, accompanied by cruel jibes about his weight. Unsubstantiated stories of past overdoses followed, as did weak conjecture surrounding the circumstances of his death.

George's big secret, however, would put them all to shame: after his death, it was discovered that, for years, he had been giving millions of pounds to those in need – from privately paying for a couple to have IVF to donating thousands to the Thalassaemia Society. Comic Relief, the Terrence Higgins Trust, Sport Relief, Macmillan Cancer Support, Ethiopian famine relief, Help A London Child, Childline and several homeless charities had all benefitted from George's secret philanthropy.

At the 2017 BRIT awards, the stars paid their respects. "A supernova in a firmament of shining stars had been extinguished, and it felt like the sky had fallen in," said Andrew Ridgeley. It had been an annus horriblis for music, but where Bowie and Prince passed almost immediately to legend as mythical creatures far out of reach, losing George resonated in a different way. George was an open book who had revealed more of himself than any of his ilk. Talented, honest, funny, vulnerable and as fallible as the rest of us, he was the most human of superstars. Sadly, for George, he had nowhere to hide.

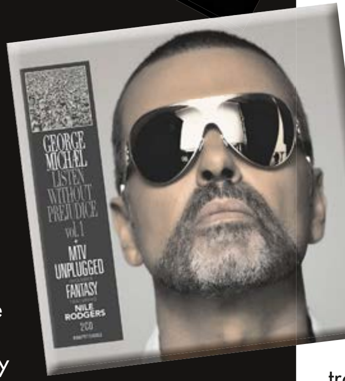
NEVER GONNA DANCE AGAIN?

THOSE LOST ALBUM RUMOURS



At his 2011 press conference, George got fans excited with mention of a new dance album to run in tandem with *Symphonica*, to be recorded in sessions while on tour. "I'm looking to work with either gay or gay-friendly artists," he explained. "A gay collective, where some of the record is sung by myself and some sung by other artists – possibly unknown ones.

"Gay men's relationship with dance music doesn't end at the same time as straight people's does," he added. "I've lived with that music for a long time. It's still a big part of my life. There's some amazing material I've got my hands on, and in collaboration with a lot of dance producers I think it will be a stunning record."



But having dropped the cliff-hanger, the scent went cold. The tour ended and very little mention was made of this long-awaited material. Producer Naughty Boy told BBC *Newsbeat* that he had been working with the star prior to his death, but seemed unsure as to what would happen with the track. "There are a few recordings that are extraordinary pieces of writing," manager David Austin recently told the *Daily Star*, adding to the expectation. "They are finished, mastered, mixed and they're sitting there."

Then, in September 2017, shortly after Channel 4 screened the *Freedom* documentary, a remix of 1990 B-side *Fantasy* – reworked by Nile Rodgers – was released as his first posthumous single. For *Telegraph* critic Neil McCormick it was "pure joy… it brings us back to a singer in his prime". It certainly reminded us of *Freedom* and the carefree George of old, but that's because that's ostensibly what it was, albeit updated with Rodgers' modish guitar chops. "There is material there, but we would not do anything without the estate wanting to be involved," Sony CEO Rob Stringer told *Smooth Radio*. "I think there is stuff to come but not at the behest of commerciality. It will be for good reason. I know he was working on a dance album."

In February this year George's partner claimed on Twitter to be in possession of the finished album, and there have been veiled suggestions that something will be coming soon – not least a tantalising statement on George's official site from sisters Melanie and Yioda: "Our aim is to carry on, as we know Yog would have wanted, to share and enjoy his precious legacy and to continue to bring you joy – through his extraordinarily beautiful music."

POP_UP Having recorded *You And I*, his royal wedding gift, George tweeted: "I'm REALLY happy with it and I know Diana would have approved." It appears Princess Diana was his sounding block – "She had a copy of *Older* four months before any of you lot!" he continued

Three days after Christmas, fans continue to gather in numbed tribute outside Michael's home in Highgate, London, leaving letters, flowers, photographs and candles

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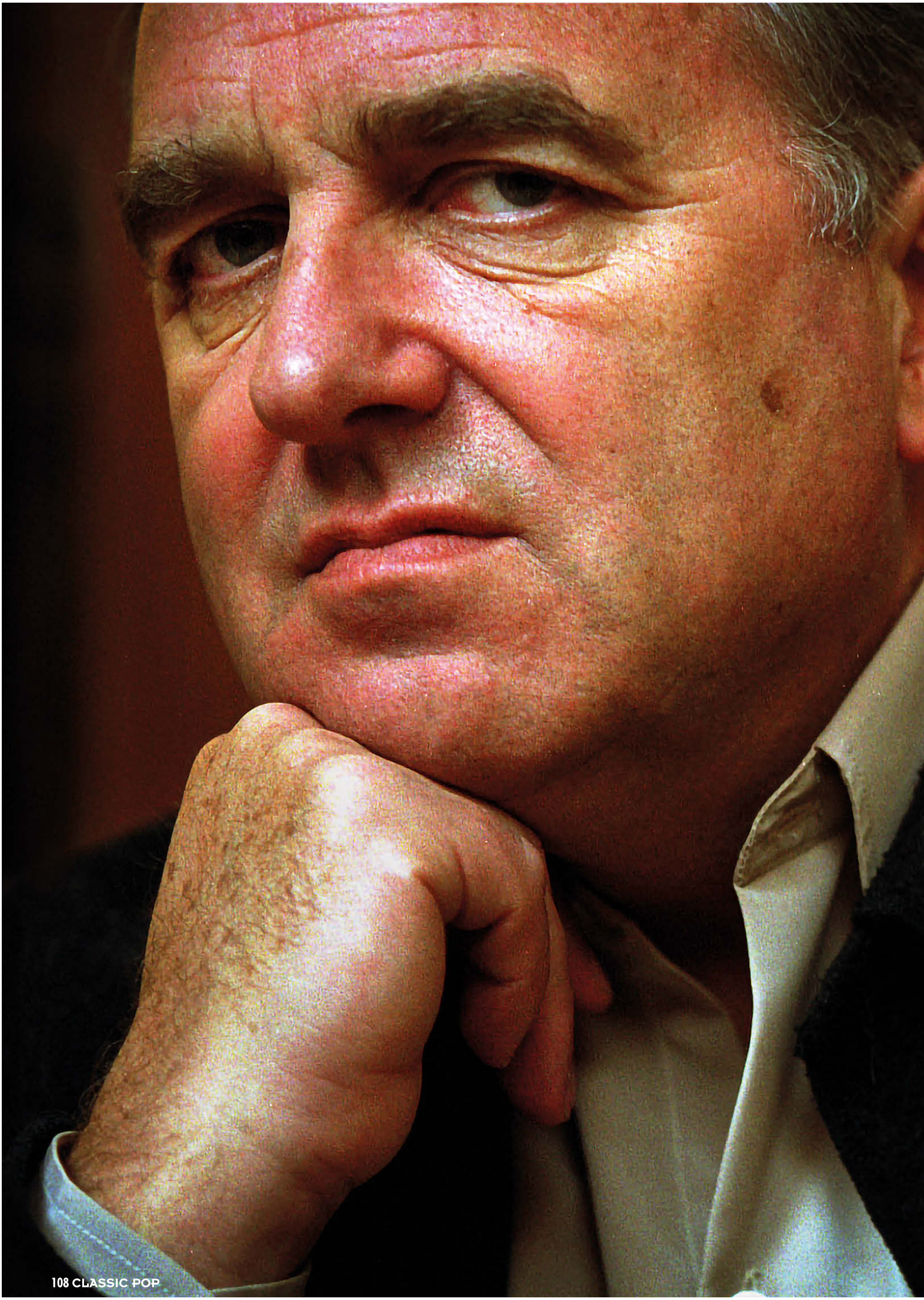

SIMON NAPIER-BELL

CAREFUL WHISPERS

HE WON GLOBAL MEDIA ATTENTION BY ARRANGING FOR WHAM! TO BECOME THE FIRST WESTERN POP ACT TO PLAY IN COMMUNIST CHINA, ONLY TO SEE THE BAND DISINTEGRATE ON THE EVE OF A 200-DATE WORLD TOUR. FORMER WHAM! MANAGER SIMON NAPIER-BELL TALKS TO *CLASSIC POP*…

IAN RAVENDALE

Raconteur, lecturer, author and above all pop band manager Simon Napier-Bell has an impressive track record that dates back to the late Sixties when he discovered Marc Bolan. The future T.Rex star was followed by acts including The Yardbirds and Japan and, most successfully, George Michael and Wham! Jazz Summers, who died of cancer in August 2015, was manager of folk singer Richard Digance and pop act Blue Zoo, and had already made contact with the group. Figuring that adding an already successful manager to the equation could swing the deal, Summers asked Napier-Bell in April 1983 if he and his Nomis company would be interested.

"I'd seen Wham! on *Top Of The Pops* and they made a big impact on me," says Napier-Bell. "They performed well and had an extraordinary image. It was classic Hollywood – Starsky and Hutch, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Great magnetism flowed between George and Andrew, a closeness, an intimacy which you don't normally see. The two girls danced well, too.

"Wham! already had a couple of UK hits, and Jazz got in touch with their music publishers Dick Leahy and Bryan Morrison, who'd said they were looking for someone to make Wham! international stars. I said that was what I do, my speciality! I take artists out of the UK and into the international arena. We talked to Dick and Bryan and they set up a meeting."

THE PERFECT IMAGE

George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley came to Napier-Bell's plush Marble Arch house to discuss what they needed, and the reality of George and Andrew – who had seemed like brothers on *Top Of The Pops* – soon became obvious, as the manager explains.

"Wham! was a fabrication. When they were at school George was obsessed with writing songs. He devised an image, which is more or less what Wham! became… two, or at first three, normal young guys around town. He never thought of himself performing, or being part of the group." As it turned out, the planned frontman for Wham! couldn't be found, and Michael reluctantly took on the job himself.

With his 15 years in the music industry doing deals and managing bands, Napier-Bell was very aware of how important image and charisma was in building a following, selling records and filling venues.

"When I first met George and Andrew I saw them as the perfect image, two incredible presences – the sort of relationship that you couldn't get bad publicity about. If they went out one night and quarrelled and had a fight, that's as good publicity as anything else, because that's what two friends do! I saw it as

Simon Napier-Bell began his career as a music editor in the film business and went on the manage The Yardbirds, John's Children with Marc Bolan, Scaffold and a nascent Average White Band

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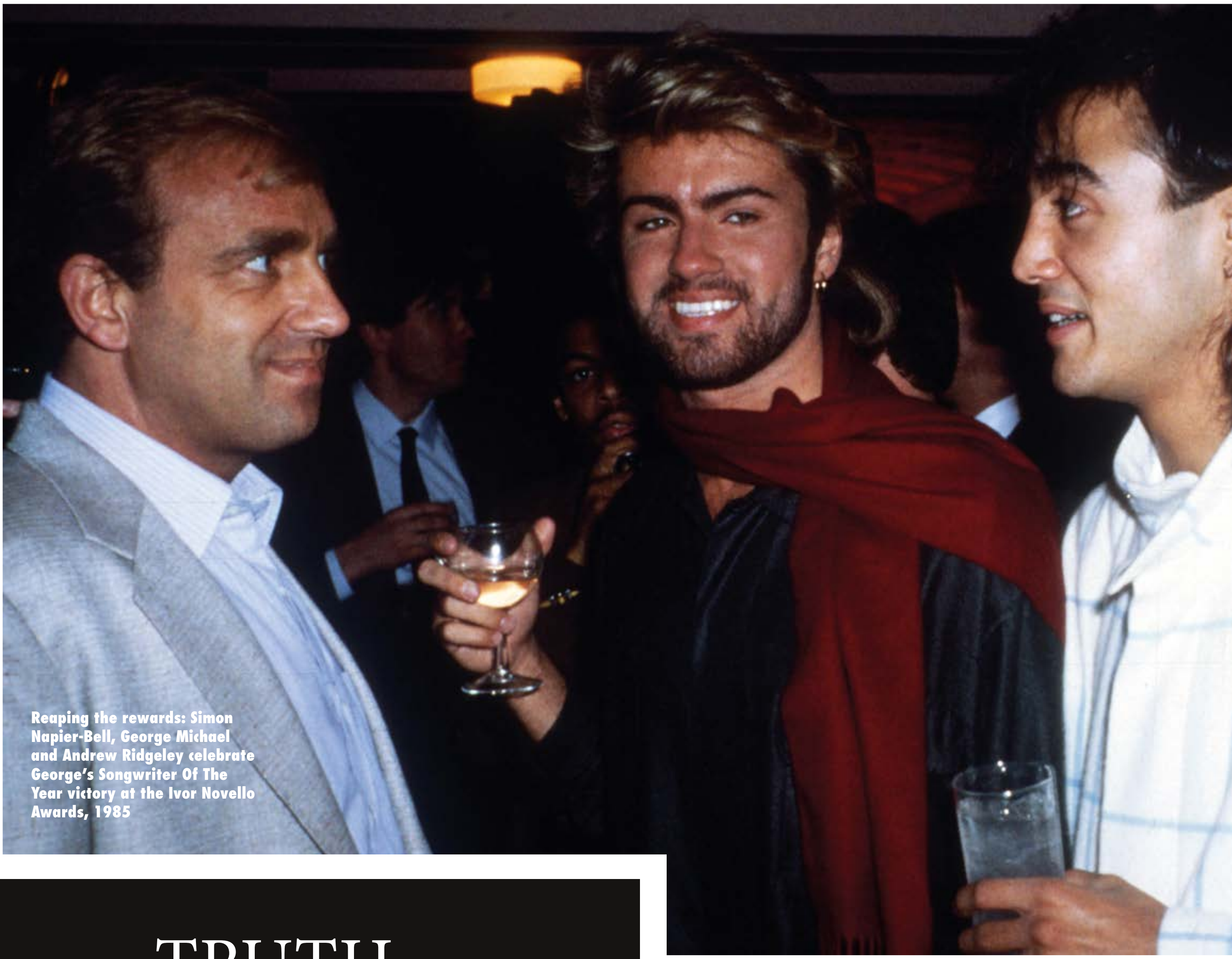

Reaping the rewards: Simon Napier-Bell, George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley celebrate George's Songwriter Of The Year victory at the Ivor Novello Awards, 1985

TRUTH OR DARE

SALES AND SEXUALITY IN THE EIGHTIES

Simon Napier-Bell is gay and has never made any secret of it – but for the Wham!-period George Michael, the consequences of revealing his sexuality could have been far-reaching. "George found it very difficult," the manager explains. "One of the reasons was that it would destroy Wham! If George had said he was gay, then it becomes a totally different image. For as long as Wham! carried on, he couldn't mention it.

"There were other personal reasons – not the right moment, he didn't want his Mum to know, and so on. But one of the strongest was that it wouldn't have been good business-wise… and I agreed with that. For Wham! to continue to be successful, it had to be the image he'd created. We didn't discuss it, but he made the right decision."

The break-up of Wham! in 1986 gave George the opportunity to come out, but he chose not to. "The whole point of leaving Wham! was so he could say; 'I'm George Michael, it's been a bit of a façade. Now here's the truth, I'm complicated and more sensitive than that. I'm gay' – or he could have said bisexual, or not sure," Napier-Bell muses. "It wasn't as easy as it is now. He took on the solo image of Wham! He didn't do what he meant to do when he broke Wham! up.

"That's the pressure of the music business. Record companies in those days believed that if you were gay and came out, you'd lose every single record buyer and fan. When George eventually did come out, he lost most of his American record sales. So you can't say they were wrong, business-wise."

absolute truth. In the music business you need true and real images. Fake images will always get found out because the paparazzi are at your house every day. If you're pretending to be something you're not, you'll always get discovered. I thought; 'This cannot go wrong. This is fantastic!'"

However, as the hit records kept on coming, Andrew Ridgeley's role in Wham! came under increasing scrutiny. He danced around, looked good and was big buddies with George, but didn't seem to otherwise contribute much. It's an assessment that Napier-Bell firmly disagrees with. "So many people have asked me what Andrew did in the group. How could Andrew claim to be half of the group? He didn't write songs, he didn't play the guitar – which is actually untrue. He did play, really quite well. And he also contributed a lot to the songs. But the main thing was that the image of Wham! was Andrew, with George's choreography and vision."

Andrew was always more outgoing than his Bushey schoolmate, and soon became popular fodder for the Fleet Street paparazzi who would catch him out on the town, getting drunk, driving fast cars and generally doing the things someone in his early 20s would be doing – particularly one with a growing bank balance. But throughout everything, what never wavered was Andrew's commitment to George, as Napier-Bell remembers. "George perhaps didn't realise how much he needed Andrew. When

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© Michael Putland/Getty Images

Andrew and George – with Pepsi and Shirlie in the background – pictured during Wham!'s world-spanning Big Tour in January 1985

George was recording the *Make It Big* album in the Chateau Minerval in the South of France, he told me; 'Andrew's just been ligging around, getting drunk, falling in the pool. Since the day we arrived here it's been totally down to me to put this album together.'

"But even when Andrew was being a mess, he was still that pillar of strength. George needed another person there, and Andrew provided it… and he provided it without the drain which an emotional, sexual relationship takes on you. Andrew was perfect. He knew about George [being gay]. There was no question about that. George really didn't have to hide anything from Andrew. He was someone George could relax with. Andrew was never anything but supportive and helpful."

CHINA IN THEIR HAND

Over the years Napier-Bell had often witnessed the power of good PR campaigns, and he came up with a left-field idea: Wham! would be the first UK pop band to play China. In the Eighties the country was still oppressive and dour under the iron fist of communism. Playing a couple of concerts would virtually guarantee worldwide publicity for a band with as upbeat an image as Wham! The group needed to get noticed in the US, and the column inches generated by the China trip would hopefully do that.

"I made a plan: I would go once a month on a trip that lasted 10 days," recalls Napier-Bell. "My instant dislike of Beijing did nothing to change my opinion that Wham! should play there. The capital was where they had to perform, which meant I would have to come to Beijing each time I visited China." Napier-Bell bought lunches, tussled with Chinese bureaucracy and dished out backhanders for 18 months in order to set up a couple of shows.

During one trip he discovered that Queen were also contemplating China. "They were looking at doing it for completely different reasons. We were wanting to do it to help Wham! break America without the normal four years of gigging; Queen wanted to show they were the biggest group in the world. I wasn't going to let them get in there and do it."

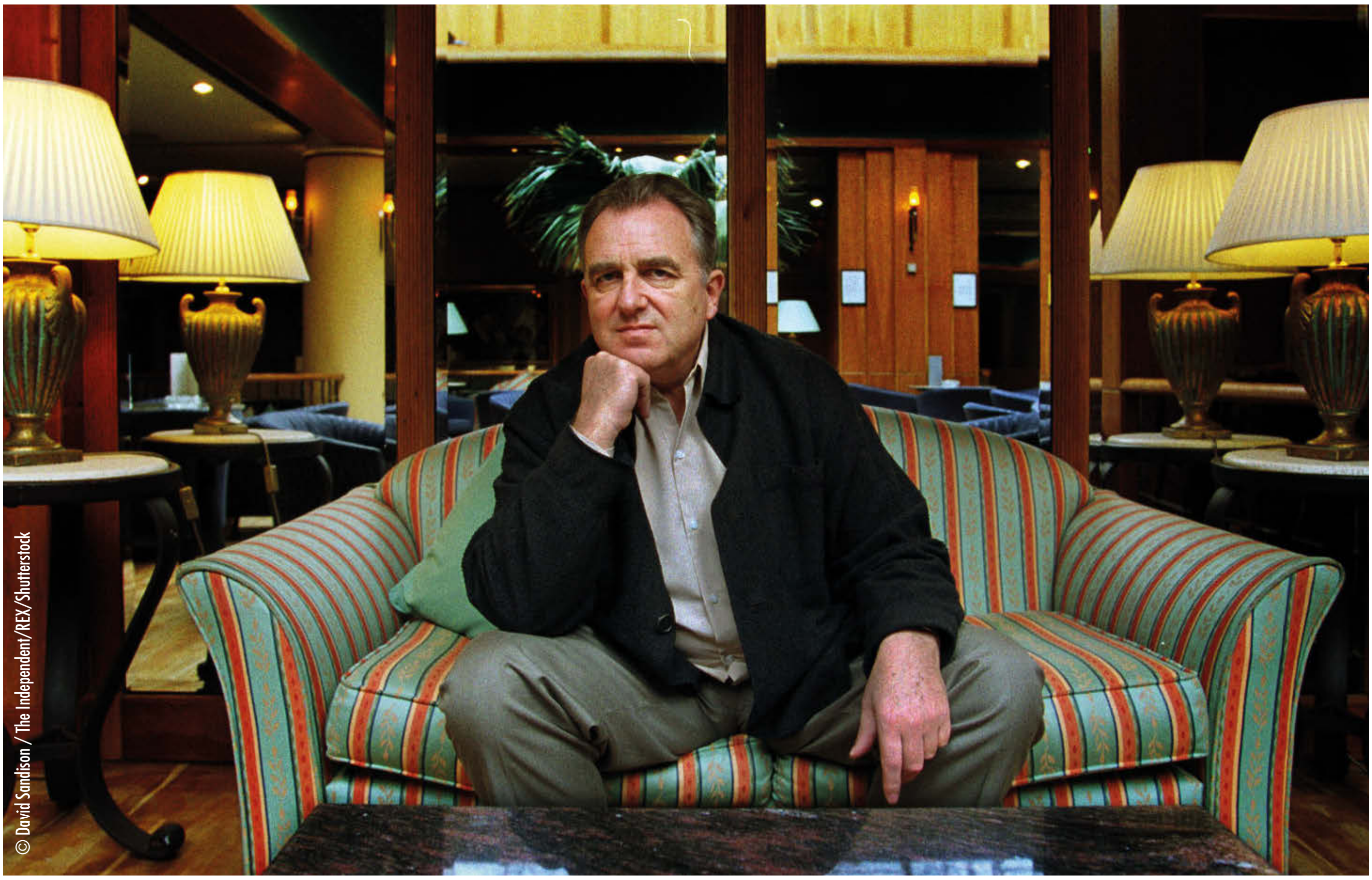
> EVEN WHEN ANDREW WAS BEING A MESS, HE WAS STILL THAT PILLAR OF STRENGTH. HE WAS PERFECT"
>
> SIMON NAPIER-BELL

To short-circuit the aspirations of Mercury and company, Napier-Bell famously prepared a couple of folders and had 25 copies of each distributed amongst the Chinese officials who were needed on-side for the necessary authorisation. The Wham! folder consisted of reviews, biographies and photographs all showing how clean-cut and morally correct George and Andrew were; the Queen brochure, on the other hand, started with a carefully chosen dictionary extract that defined "a queen' as "a male homosexual, especially if adopting the female role". In addition to photos of all of Queen dressed in as outrageous stage gear as Simon could find, pictures of drag queens and men kissing in gay clubs were peppered with glitter and sparkly lettering. The strategy worked; Queen were shunted to one side, and Wham! were on track. The deal was finalised when Nomis flew 12 government members to Japan on 18 January 1985 to watch Wham! play the Budokan in Tokyo to see in person what they were contemplating letting into their country.

The Chinese liked what they saw, and the two shows were confirmed. The next step was to make sure that the 12,000-capacity Beijing Workers' Gymnasium for the April 7 gig and Canton's 5,000 seater Chung Sahm Memorial Hall four days later were both full. Prior to their trip Wham! were totally unknown in China, as was virtually every other band apart from The Beatles. Napier-Bell remedied this by giving away two free cassettes with every ticket. Both had Wham! originals on one side and the same songs sung in Chinese by a well-known Beijing vocalist on the other. The ticket price was the price of a single cassette, and concert goers were able to re-coup the ticket price by selling the spare.

The plan worked. The venues were full of young Chinese music fans, respectfully clapping along to Wham! Even more importantly, the world's press were out in force, as Napier-Bell recounts: "In Beijing the whole of the downstairs arena, which normally holds 3000, had the seats removed and was full of photographers and journalists." The media couldn't get enough – and the duo consequently moved up a level on the live circuit and were able to fill stadiums.

The whole exercise also contributed to the liberalisation of China, coming as it did only four years before the student-led anti-government demonstrations where hundreds of protesters were shot by the military in Tiananmen Square.



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Simon Napier-Bell's revealing music business books include *You Don't Have To Say You Love Me, Black Vinyl White Powder* and the Wham! in China memoir *I'm Coming To Take You To Lunch*

"Whatever the Chinese government does to try and keep that under wraps and still won't talk about it, it was the moment when they changed path and allowed people to have freedom," says Napier-Bell. "Wham! definitely contributed to that. It wasn't the plan, but the longer I went on setting the trip up – and as I'm a natural revolutionary and s***-stirrer – it occurred to me I could use it for something else."

GOODBYE TO THE MONEY

The break-up of Wham! in 1986 came not only as a surprise to the duo's ever-growing international legion of fans, but it also threw a spanner into the works of the world-conquering plans that the two managers had in place. Looking back now, Napier-Bell is philosophical about what seemed on George's part to be financial hara-kiri. "He didn't feel able to continue," he says. "I understand that. When you feel you've got to change something, you've got to change it. The plan was for one more year – another album and a stadium tour around the world.

"For Jazz and I as managers it was very upsetting. We had over 200 gigs lined up at a half to two millions dollars a gig. We probably lost 10 million dollars each when Wham! broke up. It went from George saying 'We'll do one more album and one more year' to saying 'I can't go on' over three or four weeks. He went from one attitude to the other."

Initially it looked possible that the team might be realigned, rather than completely demolished. "We knew that Wham! were breaking up and we were not going to manage them as solo artists," Napier-Bell explains. "George asked me if I'd manage him, and I said 'Of course'. Then he said, 'I don't want Jazz, I just want you.' I told him it was impossible. You don't just ditch your partner!

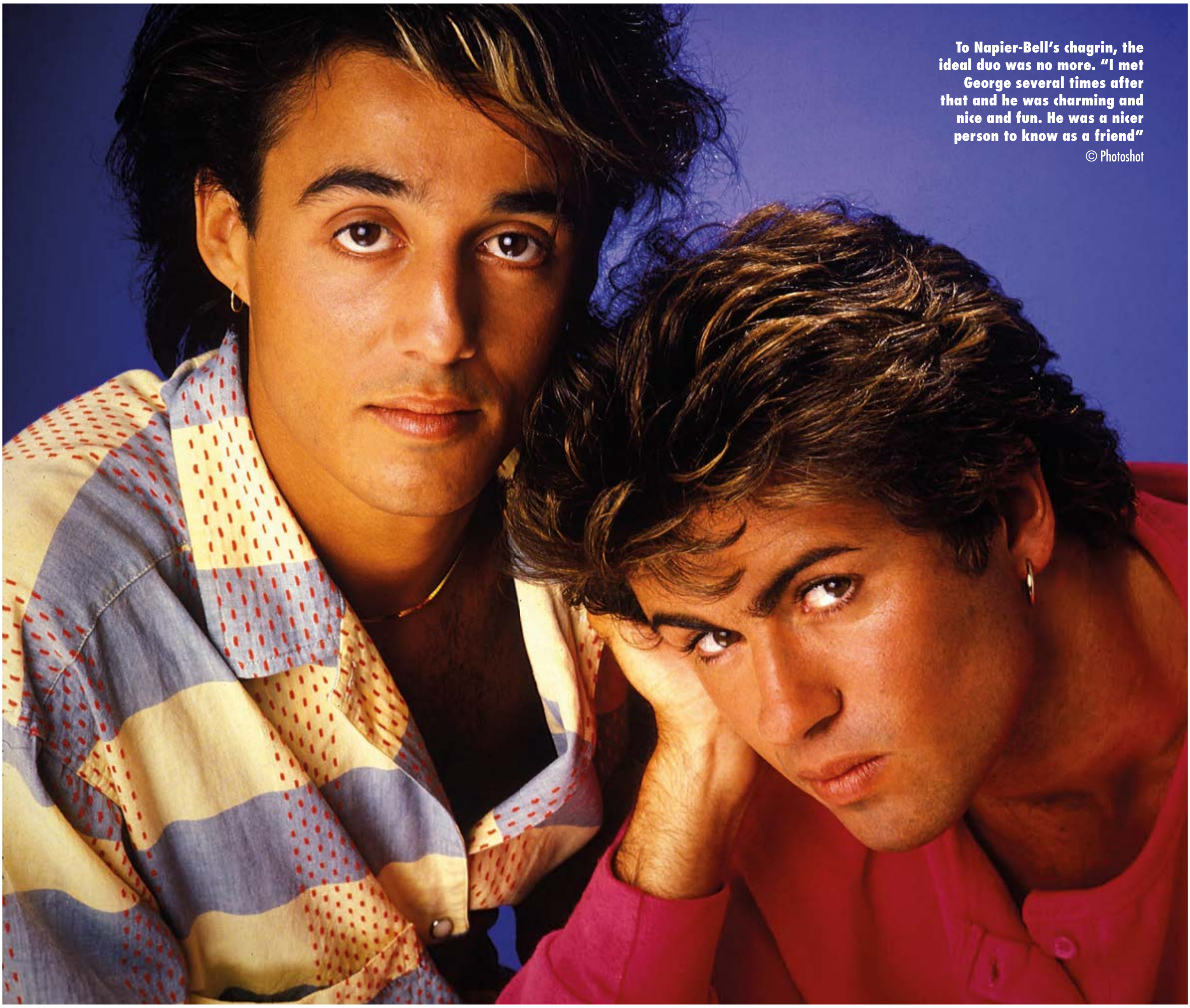
"George thought Jazz upset Americans. I can't regret behaving decently towards Jazz. I could have said to him, how about I give you half the money? But Jazz didn't really care about money. He wanted to be George's manager. It was insolvable.

"George was a very stubborn person when he'd set his mind on something. He was sure of what he wanted and how he wanted to do it. He was an admirable person. He did everything absolutely correctly. There came a point where it had to happen. It was disappointing… so Jazz and I decided to sell our company while we still had Wham!"

The pair didn't tell George directly, opting instead to relay the information via his lawyer, Paul Russell. "It was nothing to do with George, it wasn't his business," insists Napier-Bell. "We sold the company to Harvey Goldsmith. The fact that he sold his company to Sol Kerzner who owned Sun City [in South Africa] was unfortunate. We weren't aware of that. Harvey was the biggest promoter in the UK, and Wham!'s promoter. Wham! were going to break up, but that wasn't the point… Goldsmith was buying our management company, Nomis. Selling our company would have given us some good compensation from not having Wham! later.

"Then it was revealed that Harvey had sold his company to Kerzner. In those days there was a lot of hypocrisy. You tell me a major artist who hasn't played Sun City. Yes, one – George! Sun City wasn't segregated. You don't have a segregated audience. At that point left-wing America was taking a very strong stance on Sun City and was seeing Sol Kerzner, who'd invested in it, as a pillar of apartheid… when it was just a pillar of capitalism."

The real problem came when the *Hollywood Reporter* newspaper investigated the deal and published their findings under the headline "Wham! Managers Sell Their Company To Sun City!" "Typical tacky journalism. It wasn't true at all," says Napier-Bell. "We had a meeting with George and he was



To Napier-Bell's chagrin, the ideal duo was no more. "I met George several times after that and he was charming and nice and fun. He was a nicer person to know as a friend"
© Photoshot

totally understanding but told us that he couldn't live with a headline like that and said 'Couldn't you have done it in a more discreet manner? I'm going to have to publicly say that you're no longer our managers.' He wasn't really morally outraged by it. He understood why we were doing it."

The demise of Wham! to make way for George Michael's solo career was inevitable, but the cancellation of the final album and stadium tour wasn't. Under other circumstances George would almost certainly have wanted to give Andrew as good a financial send-off as possible.

"It's a pity that Wham! broke up and we didn't have that wonderful year of huge money-making," reflects Napier-Bell. "Money-making is important. And for a manager it's also prestige to be travelling round the world at the very top level you can reach in your industry. It was also a pity that the deal with Harvey didn't go ahead. Harvey also had to extract himself from having sold his company to Sun City.

"I met George several times after and he was charming and nice and fun. He was a nicer person to know as a friend after than he was when we were managing him. Managing is a very tricky relationship. The artist wants something from the manager that you don't want from a friend. Artists are always difficult people to deal with." ■

ANDREW AND ANDREW

THE ORIGINAL AND THE WANNABE

When Simon Napier-Bell first met Wham! he didn't initially realise that the duo weren't what they appeared to be – or at least, one of them wasn't… and that one was George. "It was George creating a second Andrew," says Napier-Bell. "He revered Andrew and loved the way he looked. Wham! were two heterosexual young kids out on the town, picking up girls, having fun, getting drunk. That was George's fantasy, but it wasn't a fantasy he wanted to be part of. He saw it as an image to sell the group. He found himself part of a group with a false image that he'd created. That was a problem for George right from the beginning. He was being taken away further from his natural self than he wanted to go.

"George was super-shy and never really thought of himself as good-looking, ever. When he first went to school he was a podgy Greek kid with curly hair and glasses, someone who sat next to Andrew and wanted to be like him. So he asked his mum to buy him hair straighteners, went on a diet, and got contact lenses. He was now in a position where he could say; 'Okay, I'll play the role.' So that became Wham!"

LOCKED UP IN HEAVEN

GEORGE MICHAEL MAY HAVE ONLY RELEASED FIVE SOLO STUDIO ALBUMS, BUT THERE ARE RUMOURS OF NEARLY AS MANY ALBUMS' WORTH OF UNRELEASED SONGS IN THE VAULTS. TRYING TO FIND OUT THE TRUTH OF WHAT HE ACTUALLY RECORDED IN HIS LIFETIME CAN BE HARD, AS *CLASSIC POP* DISCOVERED WHEN WE INVESTIGATED WHETHER *LISTEN WITHOUT PREJUDICE VOL 2, WHITE LIGHT* AND *THE VOICE OF REASON* WILL EVER BE RELEASED…

JOHN EARLS

One of the most frequent complaints about George Michael's music has been over the lack of good bonus material. There have been expanded reissues of *Faith* and *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1*, but both campaigns left fans frustrated at what could – and should – have been included.

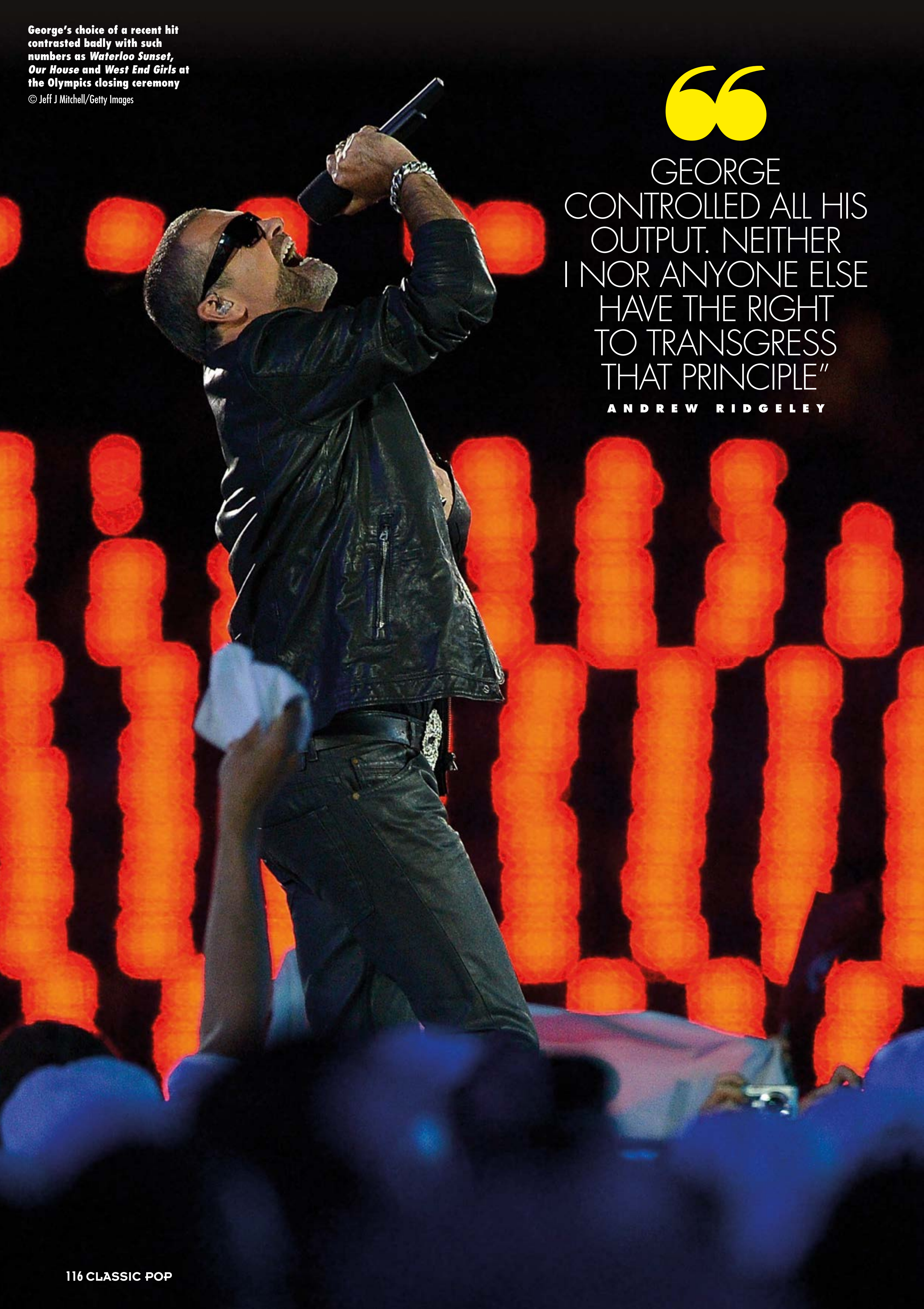
George was a perfectionist. Most fans understood that, like Kate Bush, George wasn't going to just throw songs out for the sake of having new music out in the world. "I've got some great stuff," he told *The Guardian* in 2009, "and I don't know whether I should release it or hold on to it." Nonetheless, the George Michael reissue campaigns thus far have been so badly handled that it's small wonder any clarity on what other music will officially surface is hard to find. Existing remixes and alternative versions already released have been bizarrely overlooked, so the idea of letting out any actual unreleased songs seems extremely unlikely. It's faintly criminal that the sumptuous version of *Careless Whisper* made with legendary soul producer Jerry Wexler is still only officially available as a Japanese 12" import from the single's original release.

It's a mess perhaps best summed up by the hype and subsequent letdown when an unreleased song was promised for the reissue of *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1* in September 2017. Once this "unheard song" was finally unveiled, it proved to be merely a remix of *Fantasy* – originally the B-side of *Waiting for That Day* (UK) and *Freedom! '90* (US), also previously included with the expanded *Faith* in 2011. Yes, the new 2017 version was produced by Nile Rodgers and featured his (unusually subdued) guitar… but claiming *Fantasy* as a new song was a cheap ploy seemingly purpose-built to aggravate George's fanbase. Then again, this is perhaps to be expected when Michael's manager Michael Lippman pays so little attention to detail that the biography for George Michael on Lippman's client website Lippman Ent hasn't been updated since the release of *Patience* in 2004 and thus makes no reference to George's death.

SONGS FROM SYMPHONICA

The last genuinely new song George offered was his take on Terence Trent D'Arby's *Let Her Down Easy*. Of the nine covers on the *Symphonica* album compiled from his orchestral tour in 2014, *Let Her Down Easy* was the only one not to have

> “I’VE GOT SOME GREAT STUFF, AND I DON’T KNOW WHETHER I SHOULD RELEASE IT OR HOLD ON TO IT”
>
> **GEORGE MICHAEL**



George's choice of a recent hit contrasted badly with such numbers as ***Waterloo Sunset, Our House*** and ***West End Girls*** at the Olympics closing ceremony
© Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images

"GEORGE CONTROLLED ALL HIS OUTPUT. NEITHER I NOR ANYONE ELSE HAVE THE RIGHT TO TRANSGRESS THAT PRINCIPLE"

ANDREW RIDGELEY

previously been recorded; many had already been heard on *Songs From The Last Century*. There were two other songs by other artists George performed on the Symphonica tour which weren't included on its album or DVD – Rihanna's *Russian Roulette* from the 2009 album *Rated R* and a number George adored, Amy Winehouse's *Love Is A Losing Game*. More significantly, there was a new tune George sang on the tour that is, so far, still only a bootleg. George said *Where I Hope You Are* was "my first real break-up song", and it was about the end of his relationship with Kenny Goss. Although unreleased, in 2012 George tweeted a link to a version from his Budapest concert on YouTube, giving it at least semi-official status.

George wrote *Where I Hope You Are* shortly after serving half of an eight-week prison sentence in 2010 for crashing his car while under the influence of cannabis. His incarceration in HMP Pentonville in London and Highpoint Prison in Suffolk gave rise to "an unprecedented burst of creativity", and he penned no less than eight songs in just two and a half weeks. From a singer more used to taking five years between albums, this was indeed unprecedented.

George made the revelation about his productivity to interviewer Vicki Wickham (the former *Ready Steady Go!* presenter) in 2014 on Radio 2 documentary *Up Close With George Michael*, four years after his release from jail. What happened to the other seven songs? Look no further than *White Light*…

PROUDER THAN EVER

George's final self-penned song to be released, *White Light* is forever associated with his unfortunate appearance at the London Olympics closing ceremony in August 2012. While Madness, Pet Shop Boys and company naturally played old classics, George performed a song that had peaked at No.15 two months earlier. It was George's unfortunate "Adam Ant *Vive Le Rock* at Live Aid" moment.

Officially released to mark the 30th anniversary of his first single with Wham!, *White Light* isn't actually a bad song at all, while pulsating remixes by Kinky Roland and Jackman & Thomas show that George still knew the way to the dancefloor. While *Where I Hope You Are* shared the sombre mood of *Jesus To A Child*, *White Light* was a return to the *Too Funky* era and is said to be more typical of the escapist songs germinated in prison. It's believed that there is a full album, also called *White Light*, that George completed – but the harsh post-Olympics reception to the title track made the ever-cautious artist reconsider.

While bootlegs of most of George's Nineties music are out there, surprisingly few tracks from the *White Light* sessions have leaked. The only widely-bootlegged song from *White Light* is *Every Other Lover In The World*. It's a rare outside production for George, made with Australian duo Stereogamous, who have also worked with Kylie, Sia and Scissor Sisters singer Jake Shears. Calling *Every Other Lover In The World* "a full-on house track", George tweeted in 2011 that the single would be available soon, following his offbeat cover of New Order's *True Faith*. It never did officially appear, though it's easy to find, with a mix by house DJ Marc Vedo being particularly tasty.

True Faith and *White Light* were released on George's own label Aegean, an imprint of Island. George joined Island for his 2009 festive single *December Song (I Dreamed Of Christmas)*. Although George had switched imprints within the Universal conglomerate to Virgin EMI by the release of *Symphonica*, he remained on good terms with Island. As far as can be ascertained in the half-truths and rumours surrounding George's unreleased music, it's more likely that the *White Light* album will one day be allowed out than anything owned by Sony. George's sisters Yioda and Melanie are in charge of his estate, and are said to have warmer relationships with Universal than Sony, the label they grudgingly dealt with for the botched *Faith* and *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1* reissues. This all does of course come with the standard caveat surrounding George's wishes over his unreleased music, best expressed by Andrew Ridgeley in a tweet shortly after George's death: "George controlled all his output. Neither I, nor anyone else, have the right to transgress that principle."

Above: The unofficial release of the 10 *Every Other Lover In The World* remixes

BEYOND PREJUDICE

The most famous unreleased George Michael set – partly because its title is a giveaway – is *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 2*. Recorded at the same

VANISHED VOLUMES, MISSING SOULS

WHAT WE CAN HEAR OF TWO OF GEORGE'S LOST PROJECTS

The simplest way to hear the unreleased songs from *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 2* is to Google the individual song titles. You'll soon discover that the Balearic backing of *Lonely Nights* and *So Damn Hard* are so similar that George would probably have only selected one for the finished album – most likely the slicker, more concise *Lonely Nights*. *Waiting For A Heart*, meanwhile, is loose funk from the *Everything She Wants* playbook. Best of the bunch are probably *Thank You* and *Disco*. *Thank You* has a startlingly hard beat, and sounds remarkably fresh 28 years later; it's mostly instrumental, the sole vocals a heavily-treated, unrecognisable growl. Better still is *Disco*, whose irresistible groove and celebratory vocals are a precursor to *Outside* eight years later. It also features a delicious house piano tucked away in the chorus.

While the cast list for The Trojan Souls is widely known, finished guest vocals are hard to come by. The 2CD version of *The Voice Of Reason* in circulation mostly comprises of instrumentals, with the titles pointing out who would be brought in to sing them: *Seal's Song*, *Wendy Melvoin's Song* and so on. Of these, the righteous brass of *Stevie Wonder's Song* and the funky *Janet Jackson's Song* are especially tantalising, as both would merit epic vocals by their respective talents. Sade's song *WTF* is the only one with a title, but is in truth a little bland.

Guide vocals by George are in place for the tasteful ballads *You Slipped Away*, *Maybe It's Not Your Time* and the filmic *One Day I'll Know*, but it's not clear who those songs were intended for… and it'd be fascinating to know who was meant to sing the heightened Was (Not Was) style funk of *Galaxy*.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, from the bootlegs the highlight of *The Voice Of Reason* is the only one to feature its singer's vocals – Elton John's *This Kind Of Love*, an extravagant Bond theme drama.

A TROJAN RECORD

A BEHIND-THE-SCENES VIDEO OFFERS INSIGHTS INTO THE 1993 LOS ANGELES SESSIONS…

Early in 2017, weeks after George Michael's death, a video suddenly began circulating online: an 81-minute film of studio footage from the making of The Trojan Souls album. It's unclear who leaked the material, but the cameraman is clearly George's second cousin and former friend Andros Georgiou, as George affectionately addresses him throughout the footage.

In all honesty, you'd have to be a particularly hardcore fan to enjoy the film, which is watermarked as *The Trojan Souls: The Studio Sessions*. According to Andros' voiceover, it's mostly filmed during the second day of recording in Los Angeles. Andros approvingly notes the studio's swimming pool, before George and his partner Anselmo Feleppa drive up in the singer's open-top convertible.

So far, so glamorous… but what follows entirely captures the forensically intense and – to the outsider – deeply tedious reality of what goes into the making of an album. George and his team, including his longtime bassist Deon Estus, try to put together the ballad *One Day I'll Know*. Focusing on its intro, George offers suggestions for getting its dramatic swells just so: "Let's make the drums half as long", "Take the piano out" and endlessly on.

There is some light relief, notably when George tells Andros to focus his camera to confirm that George is indeed wearing a baseball cap promoting Andros' record label *Hardback* – promptly putting another one on instead as soon as the Hardback logo is in shot.

Mostly, though, the footage confirms how much work went in to a song that remains unreleased – until Wendy Melvoin appears in the final quarter of the film to work on her song. The 13-minute jam Wendy and George work on is electrifying, highlighting just why she was such a mainstay of The Revolution with Prince.

If *The Trojan Souls: The Studio Sessions* isn't Oscar-worthy, it is a grim reminder of just how much toil George put into songs that have still yet to surface.

time as *Vol. 1*, there are two conflicting rumours behind its non-appearance. One is that Sony didn't want to release it contemporaneously with its parent album, to allow *Vol. 1* time to grow with George's fanbase following the huge success of *Faith* (that intransigence from the label was said to be part of George's dispute with Sony). A counter-rumour states George simply decided against releasing a whole album of dance music after all. What's certain is that some of the best tracks on *Vol. 2* eventually appeared on *Red Hot + Dance*, the AIDS charity compilation George curated which followed the success of *Red Hot + Blue*, the exceptionally strong 1990 album featuring the likes of U2, Neneh Cherry, Erasure and Tom Waits covering Cole Porter songs.

Red Hot + Dance was eventually released in 1992, two years after *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1*, and opened with three George songs. As well as *Too Funky*, George's other two songs *Do You Really Want To Know* and *Happy* were exclusive to the compilation. In addition to *Fantasy*, *Crazyman Dance* surfaced as the B-side of *Too Funky*, while George's regular live cover of Adamski's *Killer* ended up on 1993's *Five Live*.

That leaves six songs from the most commonly-circulated 13-song *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 2* tracklisting. One song, the apparently six-and-a-half-minute *Piece*, isn't widely in circulation, but the other five are: see our review on page 117. And yes, one of those really is a cover of Dead Or Alive's *You Spin Me Round*. Would George actually have put such a throwaway gag on an album?

Rumours abound that another unreleased project, *Extended Playthings*, dates from the *Listen Without Prejudice* era. As far as *Classic Pop* can ascertain, this consists of songs from the unreleased *Vol 2*. But, as ever with George Michael, it's hard to be 100 per cent positive, and someone – maybe George's elusive longtime co-writer David Austin – may be able to offer a definitive answer.

While it's uncertain as to how much *Listen… Vol. 2* contributed to the breakdown of George's relationship with Sony, it's accepted that the relative failure of *Red Hot*

"GEORGE WAS BACK IN THE STUDIO MAKING AN ALBUM. IT WASN'T A BIG MUSIC INDUSTRY ARRANGEMENT"

NAUGHTY BOY

Wendy Melvoin and George in the studio in Los Angeles, filmed during the early stages of the unfinished Trojan Souls project

+ Dance made him furious. By 1992, unhappy at a perceived lack of support from Sony for his charity compilation, George wanted out. His second cousin Andros Georgiou was a would-be producer who George had helped secure his own imprint with Sony, Hardback Records. Andros was also the creator of Boogie Box High, the short-lived supergroup featuring George, David Austin, Nick Heyward on guitar and The Style Council's Mick Talbot, scoring a 1987 hit with a cover of the Bee Gees' *Jive Talkin'*.

It was Andros' idea that George should write and produce an R&B album for guest vocalists to sing, with the collective to be known as The Trojan Souls. Once word got out that Sony were in dispute with George, Warner promptly stepped up and offered Andros a whopping £1 million to make the potentially hugely commercial project a reality.

Determined to really stiff Sony by making the most star-studded album imaginable for Warner, George and Andros set about persuading anyone and everyone to jump on board. Those to sign up for The Trojan Souls album *The Voice Of Reason* included Janet Jackson, Stevie Wonder, Seal, Bryan Ferry, Sade, Elton John, Anita Baker and Wendy Melvoin of Wendy & Lisa.

A 2CD set, featuring 12 songs plus a further 11 extra demo versions and instrumental mixes, is readily available. The first single, a cover of McFadden & Whitehead's *Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now*, was readied – its 12" and dub versions are among the extras on *The Voice Of Reason*'s second CD. The protracted legal case with Sony naturally delayed things, and the AIDS diagnosis of George's partner Anselmo Feleppa saw the singer stop work to nurse Anselmo before his death in 1995.

As late as 1998, Andros insisted The Trojan Souls was a reality, telling Dotmusic the legal issues surrounding it were nearly resolved, so that it would be out "early in the new millennium". However, the album had effectively been killed off the year before when Andros was fired from the day-to-day running of Aegean, allegedly for passing on George's clothes and other private possessions. Andros soon began commenting regularly to the tabloids about George's private life, eventually causing George to tweet in 2015: "I haven't seen this person in nearly 18 years."

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

There's one other unreleased George Michael project of note. After George's death, producer Naughty Boy claimed he had been working on an album with George. Like George, Naughty Boy grew up near Watford and also has a decent contacts book, having worked with such names as Beyoncé, Tinie Tempah and Ed Sheeran.

He told *Radio 1* in January 2017 the pair had started the album three weeks before George's death, saying: "George was back in the studio making an album. It wasn't a big music industry arrangement, I've just been a fan forever." They'd nearly finished one song, which Naughty Boy said he "wouldn't rule out" releasing, adding: "The song is amazing, but it's just a bit bittersweet right now."

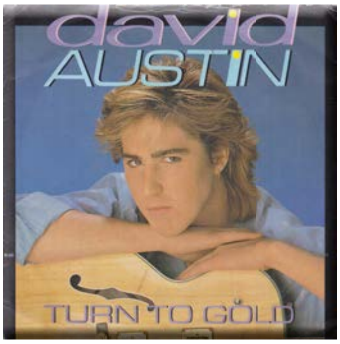
Whether that collaboration will see the cold light of day remains to be seen. One thing is certain: future George Michael reissues certainly have the potential for better extras than have been offered so far.

IN GOOD COMPANY

OVER THE YEARS GEORGE MICHAEL WORKED WITH MANY OTHER SINGERS, MUSICIANS AND SONGWRITERS, FROM THE GREATS TO THE LESSER KNOWN, ALWAYS GIVING HIS ALL WITHOUT EVER OVERSHADOWING HIS COLLABORATORS. *CLASSIC POP* DELVES INTO THE ARCHIVES…

IAN RAVENDALE

Andrew Ridgeley, Wham! partner, school friend and confidante, was George Michael's original collaborator when it came to making records, and he played a significant part in every element of his early career. While George was without doubt the musically dominant member of the duo, Andrew's role as Michael's initial main supporter and fellow-traveller in the fame game shouldn't be underestimated. Ridgeley played on the Wham! tracks and co-wrote some material, including *Careless Whisper*, almost certainly George's most well-known song.



DAVID AUSTIN

Andrew and George's first joint musical venture was in the late Seventies with The Executive, a ska group in the style of the Two Tone bands of the day – and the budding skank collective would provide George with another important future musical partner. The outfit's frequently-revolving lineup included the future Wham! duo on vocals, Andrew's brother Paul playing drums, bass man Tony Bywaters, and guitarists Andrew Leaver and David Mortimer.

After changing his last name to Austin, David went on to be a significant musical and personal presence throughout Michael's life (he was working on *Freedom*, the film documentary about his long-time friend, when George passed away in December 2016). David Austin's Wham! connection helped him win a record deal. *Turn To Gold*, his debut single from 1984, was co-written with George, who also sang backing vocals. The record was only a minor hit and David carried on playing in the Wham! live band, appearing in most of their videos. Austin later worked with George and his cousin Andros on the Boogie Box High project where Michael sang lead vocals on the outfit's version of *Jive Talkin'*, but couldn't be credited because of his Epic record deal.

Talking to Channel 4's Jonny Rothery, David Austin revealed how longstanding the duo's musical relationship actually was: "We had this reel to reel recorder, and from a very young age my mother taught me how to use it. I recorded everything. I got a guitar at the age of six, and George was a drummer… that's what he started out doing, and he sort of played on pillows." Even then, David was aware that his friend was something special: "I did recognise as a kid how commercial his voice was. The first song we wrote was called *The Music Maker Of The World*."

After Wham! Austin worked with George on his solo albums. "I absolutely love *You Have Been Loved*," he says. "We were working on the *Older* album and I was

George invited Mary J Blige to join him in covering Stevie Wonder's 1974 paean to love *As*, produced by Babyface and included on the 'For The Feet' disc on *Ladies & Gentlemen*
© Alamy/Getty Images

"YOU COULD HEAR PAIN, YOU CAN HEAR JOY, YOU CAN HEAR EVERYTHING IN GEORGE MICHAEL'S VOICE"

MARY J BLIGE

> HE HAD A VERY UNIQUE SOUND, VERY DIFFERENT TO ANYTHING OUT THERE. MUSICALLY, IT DOES NOT GROW OLD"
>
> **ARETHA FRANKLIN**

Do They Know It's Christmas far surpassed Bob Geldof's hopes for £70,000; in 12 months it had raised £8 million for Band Aid

living in France at the time. George flew out and asked me to write something acoustically. I did that, and came up with the music.

"The way George and I used to write, I would always do the music completely and then he would take it and do the melody and lyrics on top. I put a piece together, flew to London, and that kicked off the album. It was the first thing we recorded for *Older*. The record went on and we hadn't finished it. There were two tracks left to go. We were thinking 'S***, this isn't good!" *You Have Been Loved* was the last song we finished for the record."

Austin was a regular studio presence on George's sessions alongside programmer James Jackman and engineer Niall Flynn, and also co-wrote *I Want Your Sex*, *Look At Your Hands*, *You Have Been Loved*, *John And Elvis Are Dead* and *December Song (I Dreamed Of Christmas)*.

Working so closely with his old pal, Austin witnessed first hand George's rise from pop idol to worldwide superstar. "Wham! was nothing like this," he reflected. "It took everything to the next level. It changed all our lives." Austin was also Michael's manager for the last few years of his life after becoming more involved with the business side subsequent to producing the film for George's 2014 *Symphonica* project.

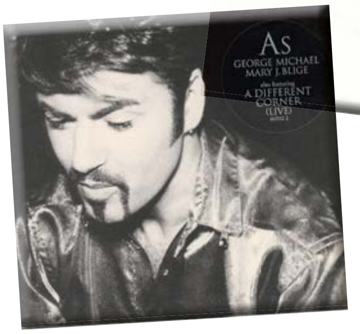
BAND AID AND ARETHA

George's first outside collaboration was also his biggest. He contributed to Band Aid's *Do They Know It's Christmas* in 1984 as the third featured vocalist after Paul Young and Boy George, and before Simon Le Bon. His position within the pop star royalty of the time was affirmed, but Michael was still looked down upon as the new kid on the block. On his own for the session without Andrew Ridgeley (who had slept in), George was a little taken aback when Paul Weller had a go at him for publicly criticising Arthur Scargill of the National Union of Mineworkers about the then-current long-running miner's strike.

The track that put George Michael on the map as a go-to collaborator was *I Knew You Were Waiting (For Me)*, his duet with soul great Aretha Franklin. The song was written by American songwriter Dennis Morgan and the UK's Simon Climie, who went on

George stands front and centre between Sting and Bananarama's Keren on Sunday 25 November 1984 as the assembled choir record *Do They Know It's Christmas*

© Steve Hurrell/Redferns



Above: George with his heroine the legendary Aretha Franklin, and a still from the *As* video with Mary J Blige

to become half of Eighties hit duo Climie Fisher. The song wasn't originally intended to be a duet; Morgan and Climie initially pitched it to Tina Turner and then, via Arista Records head Clive Davis, Aretha Franklin. Davis liked it, and suggested that Aretha could record it as a duet with George.

With Narada Michael Walden in the producer's chair, Michael and Franklin recorded the song together but did their ad-libs separately. George was understandably nervous, but knew there was no point in trying to copy or upstage Aretha. "Nobody can emulate Aretha Franklin," he wrote in his autobiography *Bare*, continuing: "It's stupid to try. I just tried to stay in character, keep it simple – it was very understated in comparison to what she did."

Aretha recalled the session for *Entertainment Week* magazine in 2017. "He had a very unique sound, very different from anything that was out there," she suggested. "When Clive Davis suggested we get together for *I Knew You Were Waiting,* I was all ready. Musically, it does not grow old."

The promotional video for the number begins with George and Aretha singing separately on large screens and carries on like that for half the song, fooling the viewer into assuming that the pair weren't in the same room – or possibly not even on the same continent – until Michael comes into Franklin's shot and puts his hands on her shoulders and the pair swap lines with each other while black and white footage of classic past duets play on the video screen behind them. "We had a super time," added Franklin. "He was calling most of the shots: how he wanted this, how he wanted that. My older sister Erma just fell for him right away. He was very friendly and personable, easy to talk to." *I Knew You Were Waiting* was a No.1 in both the UK and US and helped make George a huge solo star in America, with a subsequently elevated profile that served as spectacular promotion for *Faith*.

Unlike some singer-songwriters, George had no qualms about recording other writer's songs. On his 1999 greatest hits compilation *Ladies & Gentlemen: The Best Of George Michael* he covered *As* from Stevie Wonder's great *Songs In The Key Of Life* album. Recorded as a duet with Mary J Blige, the song was the second single taken from *Ladies & Gentlemen* and was released worldwide – aside from in the US, where it wasn't included on the album, or issued as a single (which Michael put down to Blige's record label pulling the track following his 'lewd act' arrest in the gents' toilet of Beverley Hills' Will Rogers Memorial Park). In the UK the track made No.4, helped on its way by an impressive video where dozens of purple-suited Georges and Marys are

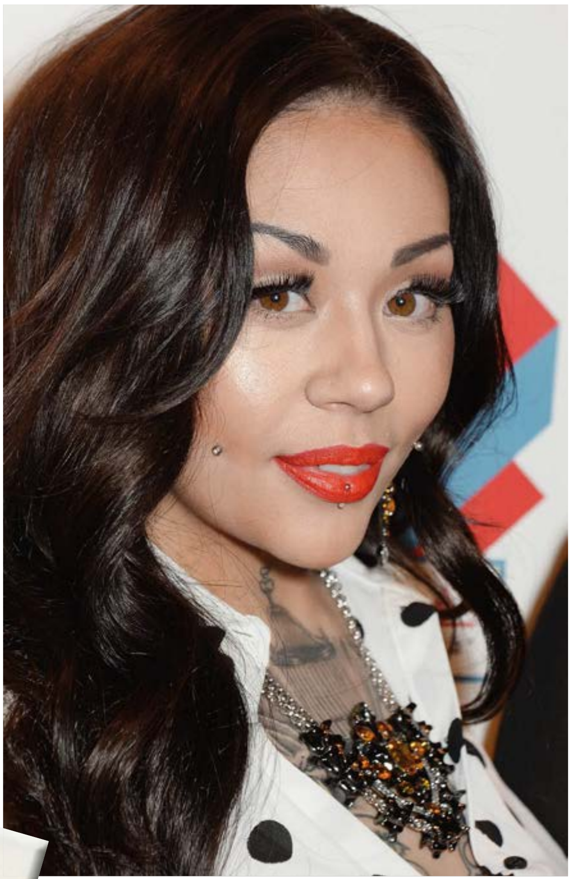
JODY AND GEORGE

A POP POUNDER THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN A SINGLE

George Michael recorded duets with many female singers during his career, Aretha Franklin, Whitney Houston and Mary J Blige amongst them, but the first female vocalist Michael teamed up with was former Shalamar singer Jody Watley, who he'd met during 1984's Band Aid recording session.

"I'd asked if I ever got a solo deal would he do a duet with me, because he told me that day how much he loved my voice," Watley recalls on her website. "I gushed about how big of a fan I was of Wham! I loved his voice, too. We kept in touch, speaking on the phone often. George said 'yes' and kept his word, which said a lot about him because he'd become an even bigger superstar, but he was still down with what he'd agreed to several years before."

The resulting Watley/Michael collaboration was *Learn To Say No*, an up-tempo stomper co-written by George and Richard 'Dimples' Fields and produced by Chic's Bernard Edwards. The song appeared on Jody Watley's 1987 eponymous first album but, surprisingly, wasn't released as a single, indicating perhaps that Sony Music (then Epic) were becoming increasingly aware of what a valuable commodity they had in Michael, and were reluctant to let another label – in this case MCA, who Watley was signed to – have a single with his name on.



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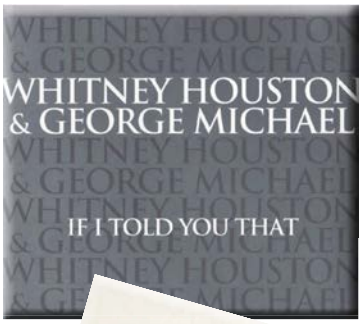
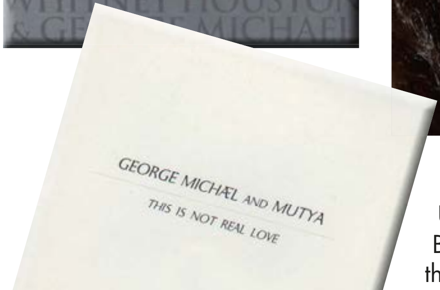
Above: George and Whitney Houston play out a nightclub seduction scene for the video of 2000's *If I Told You That*, a duet-converted re-recording of a 1998 track. Right: Mutya Buena



in a club dancing, walking around, drinking and generally enjoying themselves. Blige appeared in the *Freedom* documentary; "You could hear pain, you can hear joy, you can hear everything in George Michael's voice," she reflected.

MUTYA AND PAUL



For *This Is Not Real Love*, the second single taken from *Twenty Five*, George asked Mutya Buena, a fellow former pupil of Brent's Kingsbury High School, to duet with him. Not long a solo artist, the ex-Sugababe held her own against the bigger names Michael had sung with. The song was written and produced by George along with James Jackman and Ruadhri Cushnan, the main arrangers and co-producers of *Patience*, Michael's last full studio album. The number also appears in remixed form on *Real Girl*, Buena's solo debut album. The track peaked at No.15 in the UK charts but was only released as a single in the US two years later, where it made No.8 on the Billboard Hot Dance Club Songs chart – even though it's a ballad set to dance rhythms rather than a true club banger.

Heal The Pain from Michael's September 1990 album *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1* was written and performed in the vein of an early-period Beatles ballad. 14 years later, George asked Paul McCartney to re-record it with him as a duet to be included on *Twenty Five*, where the ex-Wham! star re-visited older songs and updated them. The 21st century version of *Heal The Pain* doesn't stray too far from the 1990 recording and shows how close to Beatle Paul

In 2000 George was invited to take the stage in the seventh Pavarotti & Friends concert, raising funds for causes in Cambodia and Tibet

They had their spats, but George and Elton John were fast friends once again when they met at a charity do for Elton's Elizabeth Taylor Memorial Fund at the Royal Opera House in London in 2011

George managed to get, both vocally and stylistically. "George Michael's sweet soul music will live on even after his sudden death," McCartney posted on his site after Michael's passing. "Having worked with him on a number of occasions, his great talent always shone through and his self-deprecating sense of humour made the experience even more pleasurable."

ELTON JOHN

George performed Elton John's *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* many times as part of his live set, both on his own and also with Elton, who became probably his most famous collaborator. The duo's association began at 1985's Ivor Novello ceremony when John presented Michael with the Songwriter Of The Year award and was consolidated several months later when they performed *Don't Let The Sun* together at July's Wembley Stadium Live Aid concert. Later in the year Michael also sang on *Wrap It Up* and *Nikita*, tracks from Elton's latest album *Fire And Ice*.

George's Wembley Stadium concert of 23 March 1991 hosted the next public performance of *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* when Elton surprised George backstage before the show and they spontaneously decided to reprise their duet. The performance was recorded and released as a charity single, making No.1 in the US, UK and Canada later that year. Alas, George and Elton had a public falling out in 2004, reportedly over comments that John made to the press about Michael's marijuana-fuelled lifestyle. He also criticised George's then-current album *Patience*. George choose the very public forum of *Heat* magazine to respond, saying that Elton "[makes] millions playing the old classics day in and day out [probably a reference to John's prolonged residencies in Las Vegas], whereas my drive and passion is still about the future and the songs I have yet to write for the public." Luckily the superstars resolved their disagreement and they sang *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* together at Elton's annual White Tie & Tiara charity ball in June 2011.

On December 28 2016 a tearful Elton opened his Las Vegas show with a poignant solo rendition of the song in tribute to his friend, telling the audience: "I only wish George was here to sing it with me." When the song had ended, John had to be consoled by a member of his band before the show could re-commence. "I am in deep shock," he wrote on Twitter. "I have lost a beloved friend – the kindest, most generous soul and a brilliant artist. My heart goes out to his family, friends and all of his fans."

PAVAROTTI AND BENNETT

Opera singer Luciano Pavarotti has duetted with many pop and rock singers over the years, and he shared the stage with George at a June 2000 concert in Modena in Italy in front of a very enthusiastic audience. Assisted by a children's choir, the duo cut two very contrasting figures yet also proved to be oddly vocally compatible, with Pavarotti delivering a controlled performance and Michael singing from the heart and not the rule book as they duetted on *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me*.

That same year George reinforced his diverse taste in vocal collaborators by cutting the Michel Legrand song *How Do You Keep The Music Playing?* as a duet with Tony Bennett. The crooner had decided to celebrate his 80th birthday by recording an album with singers including Bono and Paul McCartney. The original version of the Michael/Bennett tune

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FOR QUEEN AND COUNTRY

A STUNNING TRIBUTE TO FREDDIE

As a dynamic live artist George gave many memorable performances during his life, but for many the absolute highlight was the Freddie Mercury Concert for AIDS Awareness at Wembley Stadium in the spring of 1992. The surviving members of Queen invited the cream of rock and pop vocalists to stand in for the Queen frontman, who passed away from AIDS-related pneumonia the previous year. Michael choose to perform *Somebody To Love*, backed by John Deacon, Brian May, Roger Taylor and the London Community Gospel Choir.

Other guest vocalists at the memorial included Elton John, Annie Lennox, and Axl Rose – and David Bowie, who can be spotted on YouTube watching mesmerised as George runs through a phenomenally committed rehearsal of *Somebody To Love* with Queen rocking out behind him.

When it came to the concert on 20 April, if anyone could be said to have topped the show, it was George – just the way that Freddie had himself done during Queen's Live Aid performance at Wembley seven years previously. However, George's performance wasn't quite as effortless as he made it appear, as he later revealed when talking about the song's technical difficulties: "It's ridiculous. One minute it's up here, one minute it's down there…" *Somebody To Love* by George and Queen became the lead track on the *Five Live* charity EP, which made No.1 in the UK charts in 1993.

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"His ability to touch people through his music and his actions was unique…" Wham!'s Helen 'Pepsi' DeMacque, Andrew Ridgeley and Shirlie Holliman remember their friend at the BRIT Awards on 22 February, 2017

appeared in the 1982 film *Best Friends* and has been recorded by many, including Barbra Streisand and Celine Dion, while Bennett himself has cut the song with three different co-vocalists – Johnny Mathis, Aretha Franklin and George. Again, it's a testament to Michael's skills that he blends so seamlessly and apparently effortlessly with the jazz veteran.

Though Michael sang with many superstars as well as lesser-known artists including Jody Watley and Mutya Buena, David Austin revealed to Channel 4 that George did have a bucket-list of singers – mainly female – with whom he would have loved to record, but never got the chance. "He loved Adele," Austin revealed. "You know, George had stepped back in recent years and hadn't been as active musically. About three years ago, once he stepped forward again and started writing and putting our film together, he would sing along with Adele. I wouldn't say practice, but he would warm up along to her. He loved Lauryn Hill, too; he always wanted to sing with her back in the day. George and Barbara Streisand talked many times about working together, but it just never happened."

NILE RODGERS

George Michael's final collaboration was with Chic guitarist and producer Nile Rodgers, who had been at the singer's house just two days before he passed away. Rodgers had remixed a song of Michael's and was keen for him to hear it before anybody else.

Talking to the BBC, Rodgers explained: "I was just working with George. I was here on December 23 and had come over to remix one of his songs and was also doing a Chic concert that night. I hadn't played him the demo yet. I thought it was so cool and fairly drastic and wanted to play it for him first. I get a message saying: 'So, Nile, let's talk tomorrow!'"

Rodgers responded by saying that because he was playing a Chic gig he would be flying that day, but could he message him on Christmas Day instead? Continued Nile: "On Christmas Day, instead of getting a text, I get an alert… 'George Michael found dead'. It was heart-breaking… and he never got a chance to hear what I did. I'm ambivalent about the work now because I wanted him to hear it, not the record company. He was such a genius. He created and produced his own work, and was one of contemporary music's most respected producers. It broke my heart when George died."

As George's first and most recognised musical collaborator, it was fitting that it was Andrew Ridgeley who paid tribute to his friend at the 2017 BRIT Awards. Alongside his Wham! colleagues Pepsie and Shirlie, Andrew told the star-studded audience: "We were the best of friends. George's contribution to the great archive of contemporary music must rest alongside the immortals. His is a legacy of unquestionable brilliance which shall continue to shine and resonate for generations to come."

© Jill Furmanovsky

Producer, songwriter and disco pioneer Nile Rodgers, George's final collaborator: "He never got a chance to hear what I did"

"HE WAS SUCH A GENIUS, ONE OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC'S MOST RESPECTED PRODUCERS. IT BROKE MY HEART"

NILE RODGERS

LONG LIVE VINYL

WITH SEVERAL ALLURING PICTURE DISCS, AMERICAN 12" MIXES AND SUPER-RARE PROMOS, INCLUDING A TEST PRESSING FROM THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC, GEORGE MICHAEL'S COMBINED VINYL CATALOGUE OFFERS MUCH TO GET EXCITED ABOUT. ADD ORCHESTRAL SWANSONG *SYMPHONICA* IN A SUPER-LIMITED EDITION DOUBLE ALBUM AND WE FEAR FOR THE SAVINGS ACCOUNT. HERE'S OUR PICK...

RIK FLYNN

WHAM! YOUNG GUNS (GO FOR IT!) (1982)

While not a major chart success when initially released by Innervision in October 1982, the first Wham! single began to make waves after a last-minute *Top Of The Pops* spot generated a fresh wave of 30,000 orders, a No.3 position in the UK hit parade and immediate notoriety. Standard mint-condition 12" copies can sell for as much as £45-50 and the stickered '*Special US Mix*' (issued on 12" as part of a double pack with *Wham Rap!*) is a nice version, whilst more costly variants include the Bolivian 7" (£50), the Japanese picture disc (£100), the Japanese promo (with *Bad Boys*) (£200+) and a super-rare Mexican 12" on red vinyl – pictured above, and worth anywhere from £60-600!

WHAM! FANTASTIC (1983)

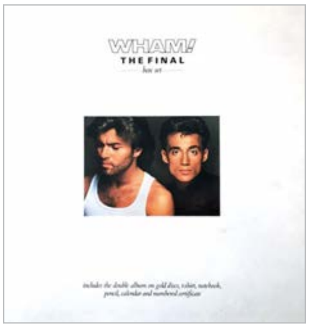
Wham!'s debut album revealed a carefree pop attitude that was underpinned by genuine and unmistakable songwriting talent. Original pressings are plentiful and go for a song, but there are plenty of scarcer options to investigate. Japanese picture discs – which come with the addition of bonus track *Blue (Armed With Love)* – can sell for up to £100; the standard Japanese export LP is around £20, while the rarer Japanese promo version can fetch up to £300. Other foreign versions of note include pressings from Argentina (£70 if mint), the Philippines (£40) and South Korea with 'WHAM! UK' on the sleeve (£90). Factory-sealed US copies and signed copies also fetch a pretty penny.

WHAM! CLUB TROPICANA (1983)

With its kitsch sleeve and effervescent, minimal B-side *Blue (Armed With Love)* in support, this is hard to resist. Beyond the standard UK 12" (which will cost around £20 for a very clean copy) or 7" single (under a fiver), collectable options include the white-labelled UK promo 7" (£20-30), the UK 12" picture disc (£30+), the even rarer Japanese 12" picture disc (£100-200), the Irish 7" issue (around £20-30), and the Japanese 7" with poster (pictured right and worth £30+ depending on condition). Those with an uncontrollable desire to secure the most sought-after rarity can be sated via the Japanese promo, weighing in at around £200-400 (bottom left).

WHAM! MAKE IT BIG (1984)

Harbouring the ultimate Eighties pop classic in opener *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go*, Wham!'s sophomore album was as much about taking back control as it was unabashed fun. Recorded in France with George at the production helm it presented the duo at their apex, topping the charts in the UK and the US, where it went six times platinum before its 10th anniversary… most impressive. Clean original pressings sell for around £20 (much more if sealed), but an example with the limited edition 22" x 15" poster will fetch more. There's also an exceedingly sparse white label promo (£60 if you can find one), a Japanese 'Master Sound' version (£150), and the US and Japanese picture discs (£30-50).



WHAM! THE FINAL 2LP BOX SET (1986)

Unveiled back in 1986 and (relatively) limited to 25,000 copies, this was one of the first deluxe box sets out there, and it was rendered all the more special by the two text-printed gold vinyl records, a numbered certificate, an exclusive calendar with single covers (marked with George and Andrew's birthdays), a T-shirt and, what's more, a Wham! notepad with picture cover and pencil, making it the ultimate fan pack. You might scoop up a cheap set for £40, but it'll likely have the T-shirt, the notebook and the poster missing; an example with all of the above in good condition – particularly with the T-shirt still in its shrink wrap – will be considerably more, and a mint, sealed box set could come in at a whopping £700.

FAITH (1987)

George's debut solo album *Faith* is nothing short of a pop masterpiece. For those on a budget, a standard issue vinyl LP in decent condition can be found for around £10-20, while upwards of £80 will secure a sealed first pressing, and reissues sell for around £25. For something a little more exotic, try hunting down the stunning Aussie limited edition picture disc featuring George in full *Faith* garb complete with guitar (around £300), the equally attractive limited edition Brazilian picture disc (around £50), or the much rarer Colombian issue with 12" x 12" poster (£100+). For the ultimate holy grail version of *Faith*, track down the German Democratic Republic test pressing; steel yourself to part with around £600, or even a bit more.

LISTEN WITHOUT PREJUDICE VOL. 1 (1990)

A regular UK issue of *Listen…* in good condition can be grabbed for around the £25 mark and the 2017 reissue (on 180g vinyl) is fairly reasonable at around £20, but collectors may prefer a sealed mint first pressing, available for around £100. Much harder to sniff out – and subsequently often quite expensive – would be the Mexican edition with its rare translucent vinyl (£20+), the Argentinian test pressing (£150), the Dutch 10" 10-track (around £50), and the beautiful Brazilian picture disc. Normal copies of the latter usually fetch around £150, but this can be elevated to a staggering £500 for the mis-pressed run – which plays Richard Clayderman! Oh, joy.

OLDER (1996)

For many, *Older* is George Michael's crowning achievement. Lovingly dedicated to both Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim and late lover Anselmo Feleppa – George's third solo album houses his musical soul in 11 classic tracks. In short, it's a must for all pop/soul collections. However, those in search of the vinyl issue should prepare themselves for a bit of a shock. Originally issued in an extremely limited run of just 500, it's seriously rare and the often eye-watering price tag understandably reflects it scarcity. Arriving with a custom-stickered picture sleeve and with lyrics on the inner, the LP will likely set you back well over £400 for a clean copy… although sealed mint copies can sell for more than double that amount.

WHAM! IF YOU WERE THERE 12" (1997)

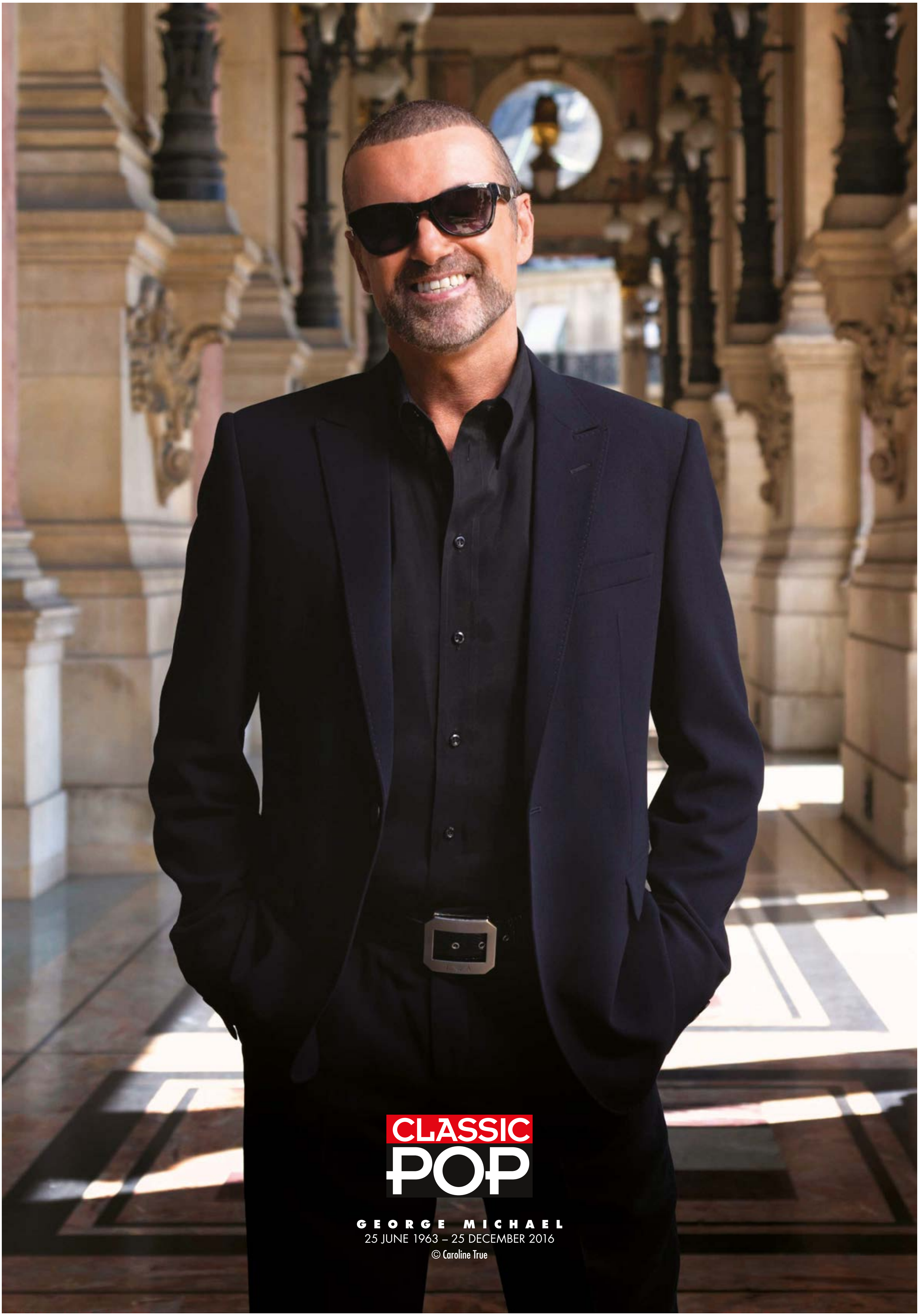
This hard-to-find UK promotional 12" sampler features half a dozen of the duo's all-time favourites – *Wham Rap! (Enjoy What You Do)*, *Young Guns (Go For It!)*, *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go*, *I'm Your Man*, *Freedom* and *Last Christmas* – and was proffered as an advance taster of *The Best Of Wham!: If You Were There* CD-only compilation that followed. Presented in a simplistic blue title sleeve, these change hands for between £15-30 on the open market. Those in search of a rarer version of the standalone *If You Were There* single should try to secure the – somewhat garish – rare Japanese 12" picture disc; this one features the album version of the song, and is purchasable for up to £100.

SYMPHONICA LTD. 2LP EDITION (2014)

With his lushly-recorded orchestral album *Symphonica* George made sure that vinyl-lovers were richly supplied with the exclusivity factor by supplying a limited edition gatefold double album that elegantly trumped the standard CD issue. The double album features the full 17-track edition of *Symphonica*, all pressed on luxurious 180g vinyl. With a mere 500 copies being released, it was always going to be in high demand; indeed the run sold out almost immediately, and copies are now changing hands for significant sums. Depending, as ever, on condition, these now change hands for between £200 and £500… and we've even seen a sealed copy go for £1,500! Madness.

WHAM! LAST CHRISTMAS (RECORD STORE DAY, 2014)

To celebrate the 30th anniversary of the release of this Christmas perennial, Legacy issued a stunning translucent split coloured green and red vinyl 12" for Record Store Day 2014, supported on the flip by a previously unreleased instrumental version. Limited to only 3000 copies, this yuletide treasure tends to sell via the best-known online auction sites for anywhere between £20 and £70, depending on condition. A rarer limited edition 7" double A-side version of the original release (with solid centre) is also worth seeking out; with the B-side *Everything She Wants* and a glossy gatefold picture sleeve with lyrics into the bargain, these are a tenner well spent.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